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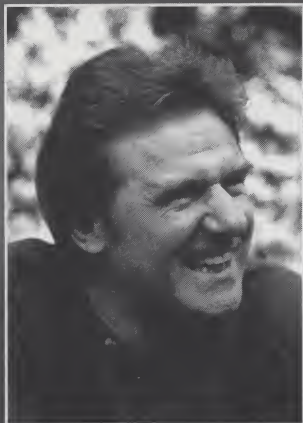
50: THANATOPHILE SEEKS SIMILAR

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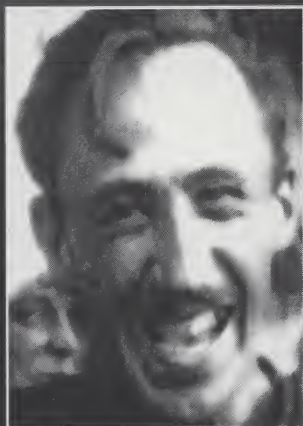
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nope, it's just a bird

An Insular Concern

We all have to face criticism and take it on the chin. It's just a shame that so much of it is patently wrong. My magnum opus was described (by an English-based sf film magazine) as 'terribly terribly British' and, worse still, the implication was made that I like warm beer. There I was thinking I'd been influenced by Burroughs, Kafka, Vonnegut etc, when my real literary antecedents were EM Forster and PG Wodehouse. Apparently. My 'crime' was to place parts of *The Planet Suite* on the Norfolk coast. Thus, it's okay for Roddy Doyle to write about downtown Dublin or Gabriel Garcia Marquez to detail the psyche of South America but God forbid somebody English should dare indulge in the parochialism of setting a story in Barnsley, Birmingham or Merseyside. Really? Try telling that to Simon Clark, Joel Lane or Ramsey Campbell.

Due to the overbearing influence of Bruce Willis blockbusters and the like, Earth-based science fiction is seemingly only acceptable if it's set in a riot-torn Los Angeles or drug-riddled New York. But what if the author has never been to LA or NY and his only perception of them is filtered through dozens of different American cop shows and action films? Then surely he ends up rehashing other people's urban myths rather than seeking a truth of his own?

Is there some world edict insisting we Brits must subjugate ourselves to the (apparent) tastes and opinions of people 3,000 miles away? I'm *not* in any way anti-American – just check my record, book and video collections – but I don't presume to write ersatz Americana when I'm English through and through and, for better or worse, this ravaged country is all I really know.

It strikes me that the abiding assumption is that sf is an American invention and that I, a whinging English slipstreamer, ought to show some humility if I'm digging in their field. *Wrong!* Without a doubt there's a massive roll-call of Yankee and Southern States greats in the sf/f/h genre: Poe, Bierce, Lovecraft, Asimov, Bradbury... Maybe Hugo Gernsback and later John W Campbell expanded and defined sf through an apparent 'Golden Age'. But hang on a moment. You could easily argue that European and Middle Eastern

cultures had dabbled in fantastic literature centuries before Columbus's dubious voyage: *Beowulf*, *The Iliad*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* anyone? Even if you want to restrict the argument to comparatively modern times, there is one figure who is 'perhaps the single most important writer in the history of science fiction' whose 'impact on the genre was immeasurable, for he either established or developed most of the themes that have formed the bulk of science fiction ever since'. This man's name was, of course, Herbert George Wells, a Renaissance Man, a Darwinist, a socialist and, by the way, terribly terribly British. The Martians didn't nuke The White House; instead, they invaded Woking, Surrey.

It's not just dear old HG, either. The key ideas in sf/fantasy/horror mostly originated in the British Isles. Not convinced? Take a peek at the following list. Technology turns against its creator: *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (English); identity/the beast in man/animalistic transformations: *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson (Scottish), *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (English); evil, all conquering, invading aliens: *The War of the Worlds* by HG Wells (English); time travel: *The Time Machine* by HG Wells (English); future course of civilisation: *The Shape of Things to Come* by HG Wells (again); genetic manipulation: *The Island of Dr Moreau* by HG Wells, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (English); picaresque or episodic satirical adventure travelogues: *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift (Anglo-Irish); immortality: *She* by H Rider Haggard (English); pure adventure: anything by Jules Verne (French, for goodness sake!); space travel: Englishman William Godwin's fanciful, swan-assisted lunar flights, Jules Verne again with *From the Earth to the Moon*, Wells again with *The First Men in the Moon*; fully-fledged dystopias: *1984* by George Orwell (English), although Russia's Yevgeny Zamyatin has a strong claim with *We*; modern re-tellings of Arthuriana: *The Once and Future King* by TH White (English); 1,000-page fantasy quests: *The Lord of the Rings* by JRR Tolkien (English); not forgetting that 'most characteristic form of British science fiction, the catastrophe story', most widely associated with those Brits John Wyndham, John Christopher and early

JG Ballard and Brian Aldiss, though, I'll admit, not actually invented by any of them.

And while we're on the subject of innovations, how about matching up these Great British pioneers and their inventions or innovations: William Caxton (printing press), Charles Babbage (computer), James Logie Baird (television), Arthur C Clarke (satellite communications). Where would the world be without them?

Okay, I'll take my tongue out of my cheek and rest my case. No doubt you'll all have plenty of quibbles with my scholarship and chronology. Write in and slag me off, see if I care! Better still, make me Guest of Honour at AmericaCon!

In the meantime, I'll stop ranting for a while but I'm going to say it loud and say it proud: I'm terribly, terribly British! It's *our* genre and we'll do what we like with it. And by the way, I'm not scared of writing about emotions, I don't support the class system, I don't denigrate other ethnic groups or different cultures...and I certainly don't drink warm beer!

*These quotes are taken from Paul Kincaid's *A Very British Genre: A Short History of British Fantasy and Science Fiction* (BSFA, 1995). My thanks to Paul for permission to quote freely.

Allen Ashley

Crimewave

In the autumn of this year TTA Press is launching an exciting new magazine of modern crime fiction called *Crimewave*. Already attracting contributions from some of the biggest names in the genre (Martin Edwards, Maureen O'Brien, Ian Rankin, Julian Rathbone, etc) plus some authors TTA readers will be familiar with (Peter Crowther, Mike O'Driscoll) and discovering some hotshot new writing talents, this new magazine promises to be something very special. As well as further contributions we are also seeking as many advance orders as we can get, so please turn to the details opposite and send those orders in!

Feedback

The letters pages will return next issue. Please feel free to comment on any points raised in the magazine and/or provoke some arguments of your own.

special offers

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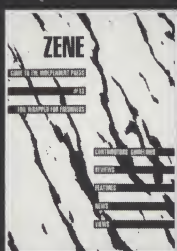


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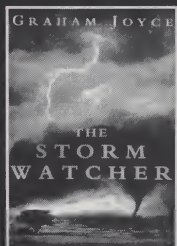
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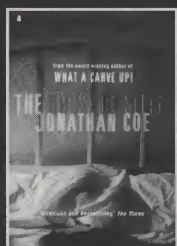
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ISSN 1352-3783

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website under construction

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Subscriptions (four issues)

UK: £11

Europe: £13

RoW: £15

USA/Canada: US\$22

Cheques, postal orders, etc should be made payable to 'TTA Press' and sent to the address above. Subscribers abroad may pay by foreign currency cheque at rates equivalent to those listed — this method is preferred to foreign cash. The magazine is published quarterly in March, June, September and December

Submissions

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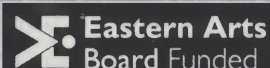
Black Bear Press, Cambridge

Bookshop Distribution


Central Books, 99 Wallis Rd, London E9 5LN (0181 986 4854)

Trade Distribution

Diamond Magazine Distribution Ltd, Unit 7, Rother Ironworks, Fishmarket Rd, Rye, E Sussex TN31 7LR (01797 225229)



Haruspex



christopher Priest

THE MORNING OF THAT JANUARY DAY WAS ICY cold with bright but slanting sunlight, the blue sky lending an electric radiance to the hoar frost that lay sharply on the grass and shrubs of the Abbey grounds. Earlier I had taken a brief walk across the Long Lawn, but the pre-dawn chill had driven me indoors again after a few minutes. Now I waited in the draughty main entrance hall of the Abbey, behind the closed double doors, listening for the sound of tyres on the gravel drive outside.

The car sent by the solicitor arrived punctually, only a few seconds after the clock in the stairwell had finished chiming nine o'clock. I snatched the doors open as soon as I heard the car come to a halt. The frozen air swirled in and around me.

The simple formality began.

The chauffeur climbed out of the driver's seat, lowering his head to one side to avoid dislodging his cap, then straightened his full-buttoned jacket with a jerking motion at the hem. He stood erect. Without looking in my direction he walked smartly to the rear compartment of the car, and held the door open. He stared into the distance. Miss Wilkins stepped down: a brief vision of silken stockings, a tight black skirt, glossy shoes, mousquetaire gloves, a discreet hat with a wide brim and a veil. She was clutching the small, box-shaped parcel I was expecting.

As she climbed the double flight of steps towards the main door the chauffeur followed. He stood protectively behind her as she confronted me. As usual she did not look directly at me but held out the package for me to take. She was looking down at the steps, a parody of demureness. Intoxicating waves of her civet-based perfume drifted across to me, and I could not suppress a relishing sniff.

I took the package from her, and also the release form that required my signature, but now I had the parcel in my hands I was no longer in any hurry. I shook the package beside my ear, listening to the satisfying, provocative sound of the hard little pellets rattling around inside. All that potential locked within! I stared directly at Miss Wilkins, challenging her to look back at me, but her expression remained frightened and evasive. She could not leave without my signature on the release, so naturally I made her wait. I like to see fear in another person's face, and in spite of her seeming composure, and her deliberate avoidance of my gaze, Miss Wilkins could hide her apprehension no better than she could conceal her youthful allure. She was trembling, a hint of convulsive movement that induced a terrible bodily craving in me. As usual, she had gone to manifest efforts to make herself unattractive to me. The jacket and skirt of her suit, made of heavy, businesslike serge, and of forbidding stiffness, for me only served to emphasize the hint of feminine ripeness that lay beneath. The delay I was causing interested me, the fear in the young woman stimulated me, and her scents were all but irresistible.

I said softly, "Will you enter my house, Miss Wilkins?"

Beneath the veil, her steadfast gaze at the ground was briefly interrupted; I saw her long lashes flicker.

"I dare not," she said, in a whisper.

"Then —"

The moment was interrupted by the chauffeur, who shifted his weight in an impatient, threatening manner.

"Please just sign the receipt, Mr Owsley," he said.

I did not mind him intervening, although I resented the sense of intimidation. He had his job to do; I expected only that he should do it civilly. I gave the young woman an appreciative smile for bringing me my pellets, hoping to excite another response, perhaps even a glimpse of her eyes, but during the many brief visits she had made in the last few months she had never once looked straight at me. I fussed with my pen, making it seem that it was unexpectedly dry of ink, but I must have tried this once before in the past. Miss Wilkins had another pen at the ready, concealed in her gloved hand, and she moved deftly to provide me with it. I took it from her, contriving to brush my fingers against the soft fabric covering the palm of her hand, but once I had the thing in my hand there were no more excuses for delay. I signed the receipt for the package, and Miss Wilkins seized it from me with a fearful sweep of her hand.

There was a momentary unavoidable collision of her fingers with mine, but she turned back to the steps and at once hurried down them to the car. The chauffeur strode beside her. Her last scents briefly swirled around me, and I darted my face through them, sniffing them up: not everything of the flesh she exuded was concealed by the bottled perfume.

I went to the parapet to watch her, again admiring her silk-clad legs as she climbed elegantly into the rear compartment of the limousine. Although blinds obscured most of the windows, I could make out her head and shoulders as she settled back into the seat. I could not fail to notice the shudder that convulsed her when the chauffeur closed the door on her. He hurried to his cab, climbed stiffly inside, and started the engine at once. Neither of them glanced back at me or the Abbey. Miss Wilkins lowered her face, brought a folded white handkerchief to her eyes, held it there.

The silver-grey Bentley Providence swung around the ornamental sundial, then accelerated down the drive towards the gates. Gravel flew behind it. I could hear the sound of the tyres long after the car had passed behind St Matrey's Stump and out of my sight.

Aware of the importance to me of the day, Mrs Scragg had arrived at work early that morning and was already in the kitchen, waiting for me to bring the pellets to her. What she did not know was that I had mystical evaluations of the pellets to perform first.

I hurried as quietly as I could to the conservatory at the far end of the East Wing and locked the connecting door behind me. I glanced in all directions from the windows to make sure I was unobserved.

Across the Long Lawn, in the hollow beyond the trees, morning mist hung in evil shroud above the Beckon Slough. I stared across at it for a moment, trying to detect any sign of movement from within the cover of thick trees. It was a windless day and the mist was persisting well into the morning, the sunlight as yet too weak to disperse it. I shivered, knowing that I would soon have to venture that way.

I was in the cooler part of the conservatory, the one that faced down towards the Slough. In the normal course tropical plants could be expected to thrive in a glass en-

closure on the south face of any house in this part of England, but here on the Beckon Slough side the air was inexplicably chilly and condensation usually clung to the panes. No specimens from the equatorial rain forests would grow in the mysterious dankness, so here were kept the pots of common ivy, the thick-leaved ficus, the *fatsia japonica* in its huge cauldron. Even hardy plants like these had to struggle to maintain life.

I squatted on the floor beneath the *fatsia*, first checking the most basic of facts, that no error had been made and that the package was appropriately addressed to me: *Mr James Owsley, Beckon Abbey, Beckonfield, Suffolk*. Of course it was correct; who else would receive such a package? But like everyone else I had my fantasies.

Inside, as I rocked the parcel to and fro, I could feel the loose movement of the pellets, their deadly weights knocking about in their separate protective compartments. The medical staff at the Trust had for some reason sealed up today's consignment more securely than usual, itself an intriguing augury. I was forced to tear at the stiff brown sealing tape, accidentally bending back the nail of my middle finger as I did so. Sucking at it to try to assuage the pain I got the lid open and shot a glance inside to be certain as quickly as possible that everything was in order and as I required.

A faint chemical smell, with its hint of preservatives masking the truer stench, drifted promisingly around my nostrils. Beneath it, the darker, headier fragrance of putrid organics. The muscles of my throat tightened in a gagging reflex, and I felt the familiar conflict of terror against rapture, both hinting at different kinds of oblivion.

The sixteen compartments on the top layer, four by four, each contained a pellet, brown-red or grey-pink, the exact shade indicating to me from which part of the source it had been removed. Every pellet had undergone primary compression by the Trust staff, bringing it down to the approximate size of a large horse-chestnut, but their methods had not yet become systematized or a matter of routine and the results were uneven in shape and size. I knew that the compression was one of the means by which the staff tried to distance themselves from their work, but I cared only about the vital essence. Each pellet was the result of individual sacrifice and surgical endeavour.

Satisfied already with the contents of the package, I pushed my fingers down the sides of the box and with immense care lifted away the top layer. I placed it gingerly aside on the stone-flagged conservatory floor. Underneath was the carton's second level, also arranged four by four, and here the pellets were less well formed than the ones on the top, closer in shape to their clinical origins. Rapture and terror again took hold of me. I touched one of the pellets at random and found it bewitchingly hard and resilient to my touch, as if it had been allowed to dehydrate. I picked it up and pressed it gently beneath my nostril, inhaling its subtle fragrance. The hardening process had made the release of its essence more reluctant, but even so I could sense the death of the person who had grown the pellet for me. I knew that this pellet had struggled for months in the silent but unceasing contest of decay, and as a consequence it was empowered with the ineluctable life-age of the dying.

I returned the pellet to its tiny compartment, then lifted aside the second layer. Two more layers were below, also arranged in sixteen square compartments. All of them were filled. For once the Trust had sent me not only quality and diversity, but quantity too. Sixty-four pellets were more than enough to get me through the week that lay ahead. A new and surprising sense of optimism surged through me.

I wondered: could this be the time I had been waiting for, perhaps? If I regulated my appetites, partook steadily of the pellets, varied my intake, started with the most powerful to make up for the unsatisfactory week I had recently endured, then gradually moderated my intake so that I used only the grey slices of tissue until I had the pit under control, then took the rest in a rush, dosing myself until insensate on the most potent of the reddish ones...?

Could the nightmare reach its hitherto unimaginable end?

This sudden rush of optimism came because I knew my strength was starting to decline. I could not continue to struggle alone much longer.

Many aspects of my life were a source of consternation to me. My father, who as a young man had been employed as a sin eater in the six parishes in the vicinity of the Abbey, often spoke of his wish for me to follow his way, while warning me of the attendant dangers. As he saw me growing up with a greater haruspical power than his own I knew he realized that I was overtaking him. The conflict of parental hope against fear helped destroy him, and in his last years he slumped into hopelessness and melancholy. In the final twelvemonth of his life his madness took hold completely and he taunted me with grotesque descriptions of what befell those who perceived the powers of entrails in their efforts to control past and future. That I was already one such was a fact he could never entirely accept. He had had his own arcane methods; I had mine. It was the duty and curse of the male line of our family to stand on the brink of the abyss and repel the incursion from hell. When he perforce abandoned the struggle, I took his place. I remain in that rôle, following my ancestors, until someone else replaces me. There is no alternative, no end to the struggle.

I was brought out of my reverie by a staccato rapping sound on the glazed door that led back into the house. Mrs Scragg was standing beyond it, her hand raised, the bulging signet ring she had used to rap on the glass glinting in the daylight. I moved my chest and arms around to shield what I had been doing and quickly returned the trays of pellets to their carton.

I stood up and unlocked the door.

"Mr Owsley, I must speak to —"

"I have obtained some more supplies, as expected," I said, walking through and closing the conservatory door behind me. I proffered the parcel of pellets to her. "You know what to do with them. The rest may be kept in the cold store until later."

"Mr Owsley. James..."

"Yes?"

"Whatever you instruct, of course," she said. She glanced at the parcel in her hands, and I heard a deep intake of breath. "I am ready for that. Also, should you —"

Our eyes met and her unspoken meaning was clear. The arrival of the packages from the Trust often had a disturbing effect on us both, and sometimes, unpredictably to outsiders had they been there to see it, but memorably for us both, alone together in the house, violent sexual coupling would follow in the minutes after I received the pellets. Our physical encounters were so spontaneous that they often occurred wherever we happened to be: once against a bookcase in my library, another time on the snooker table in the Great Hall, actually beneath the eye of the hagnoscope hidden there.

We rarely alluded explicitly to the darker side of our relationship, so this morning's invitation from her was a novelty. Normally, we played the roles of master and servant, she with an undercurrent of resentment I was never quite sure was genuine or assumed, I with a lofty disdain that sometimes I truly felt, sometimes I put on for her benefit or mine. It was my place to make the first move, but today I was full of haruspical hope, not bodily lust.

"No, Patricia," I said as gently and quietly as I could. "Not today."

Anger briefly flared in her eyes; I knew she hated sexual rejection. But I was feeling calm and positive, excited by the realization of what the new pellets would mean for my destiny.

"Then allow me to cook for you...sir."

"If you would."

"Do you have a preference today?"

"A ragout," I said, having already considered the various choices. "Do you have a suitable recipe?"

"Mr Owsley," she said. "Don't you recall the stew I cooked for you last week?"

"I do," I said, for it had been a memorable experience. "I do not wish you to try that recipe again."

"It was not the method but the ingredients."

"But it is the ingredients I must consume," I said. "No matter what your damned method might be, I require the pellets to be appetizingly prepared."

She walked away from me with bad grace.

At times like this I cared little for her feelings, because I knew she was being well remunerated under the terms of the Trust. The mortgage on her house had been repaid in full to the loan corporation and invalid John Scragg, her husband whose health had been ruined during his service in the Great War, was more comfortable than he could ever once have dreamed of. I was the greatest good fortune to the family Scragg. In this light the additional pleasures I took with her were a small price for her to pay. None the less, she continued to resent me. My father once told me that he and my mother had also had problems with servants, until they found the remedy.

With the domestic arrangements taken care of for the remainder of the day — indeed, for the rest of the week — I was determined that my optimistic mood should not be broken. I felt that if I could not confront the mystery of the Beckon Slough on a morning like today, then I might never in any conscience be able to again. I found my warmest coat, and left directly.

The day was bright, icy and shimmering with the promise of deeper winter weather to come. The frosted grass crunched enticingly under my shoes as I strode down the slope of the Long Lawn. I knew I was counting on the buoyancy of a passing mood to bear me through the dread of what lay ahead. As I passed from the blue-white, winter-sunlit slopes of frosted grass close to the house, and went along the cinder track that led into the dark wood, the cooler fears of my mystical calling returned. My pace slowed.

Soon the first tendrils of mist were reaching out above my head. Around my ankles eddies of whiteness dashed like slinking fish. The temperature had dropped ten or fifteen degrees since I had left the house. Above, in the gaunt branches of the trees, rooks cawed their melancholy warnings.

The slope was steeper now and where the path lay in permanent shadow the frozen soil was slippery and treacherous. Brambles grew thickly on each side, the dormant shoots lying across the path, their buds and thorns already worn away in several places by my frequent passing.

The Beckon Slough was ahead.





I smelt it before I could see it, a dull stench drifting out with the mist, a dim reminder of the pellets' own putrid reek. Then I could see it, the dark stretch of mud and water, overgrown with reeds and rushes, and the mosses and fungi that surrounded it.

Life clung torpidly and uselessly to the shifting impermanence of the bog. Saplings grew further back around the edge of the marsh, although even here the ground was too sodden to hold the weight of full-grown trees. The young shoots never grew to more than twelve or fifteen feet before they tipped horribly into the muck below. Roots and branches protruded muddily all around the periphery of the consuming quagmire, along with the sheets of broken ice, slanting up at crazy angles, broken by the sheer weight of the intrusion from above, the machine that had descended so catastrophically into the vegetating depths. It remained in place, an enigma that fate had selected me to unravel.

About a third of the way across the Slough were the remains of the crashing German aircraft. Now it rested, frozen in time. It was painted in mottled shades of dark brown and green, and it had made its first shattering impact. It had been immobilized as it rebounded, rising in plumes of icy spray from the frozen muck. The plane's back had broken, but because the process of disintegration was still taking place it remained recognizable. A few seconds into the future the plane would inevitably become a heap of twisted, burning wreckage amongst the trees, but because it had been immobilized in some fantastic way it was for the moment apparently whole.

The wing closer to me had broken where it entered the fuselage. It and its engine would soon cartwheel dangerously into the trees as the terrible stresses of the crash continued. The propeller of this engine was already broken: it had two blades instead of three, the missing one apparently trapped somewhere in the mud, but the spindle was still rotating with sufficient speed that the remaining two blades were throwing a spray of mud in a soaring vane through the mist above.

The other wing was out of sight, below the surface, its presence evinced by a swollen bulge of water, about to break out in an explosion of filthy spray.

The perspex panes of the cockpit cover were starred where machine-gun bullets had left their trail across the upper fuselage. Mud had already sprayed across what was left of the canopy. Inside, horribly and inexplicably, crouched the figure of the man who waved to me.

He waved again now.

I stared, I raised one hand. I raised another. Uncertainty froze me. What would a wave from me mean? What would it imply?

I briefly averted my gaze and lowered my arms, embarrassed by my weakness of will. When I looked back the man inside the aircraft waved again, pointing up at the perspex canopy with his other hand.

I had been visiting the scene of this frozen crash for several weeks and by careful measurement and reckoning had worked out roughly where the plane's final resting place was likely to be. Every day the tableau I saw had moved forward a few more instants of time, heading for its final surcease. Throughout the gradual process the man remained in the cockpit, signalling to me. His face was distorted, but whether it was with pain, or anger, or fear, or all three, I could not tell. All I knew was that he was imploring me to help him in some way.

But how? And who was he? For some reason he was standing in the cramped cockpit, not in one of the two seats where the pilot and another crewman would normally be positioned. I knew he was not one of them, because I could also see their bodies, strapped into the seats, their heads slumped forward.

The tail of the aircraft was intact, painted dark green with paler speckles, and bearing a geometrical device that already had such profound terror and significance that I could only stare at it in awe. It was the sign of the swastika, the broken four-legged cross, once a symbol of prosperity and creativity, Celtic, Buddhist, Hindu, revered by ancient peoples of all kinds, but recently suborned by the vile National Socialists in Germany and made a token of suppression, brutality and tyranny.

It was an aircraft of the German Air Force, the *Luftwaffe*, the Air Weapon, that was crashing here. It was rising out of Beckon Slough, immobilized by my

attention to it. Somehow, my interest in it held it here. Soon, if I were to release it, presumably by inattention, the plane would conclude its dying fall: the broken wing would cartwheel into the woods, the fuselage would complete its rebounding lurch into the air before sinking finally beneath the filthy mud, and the spilling aviation spirit would explode in a deadly ball of white flame, detonating the hidden load of bombs that were carried aboard.

But not yet. I had its mysteries to fathom first.

They were focused on the presence of the man who watched me from the damaged cockpit, signalling desperately to me. But how could I reach him? Did he expect me to walk across the wreckage, in hazard to myself, to free him? There was a violent dynamic in the plane: to try to enter it might embroil me in its destructive end. The only logical way for me to scramble across to the cockpit would be along the unbroken wing, but this, as I have said, was half-submerged in the frozen slime.

I felt no urgency to respond to the man's pleas. Anyway, there was a larger mystery.

Five weeks earlier I had spotted what I thought must be a serial number stencilled on the side of the plane's fin, beneath the swastika. I had since spent many hours in my library, and in correspondence with other scholars and investigators, some of them abroad, and had established beyond doubt that such a plane with such a registration number did not exist! Indeed, the Heinkel company, whose serial number sequence it turned out to be, was at present several hundred units short of such a number.

Moreover, it was self-evidently a warplane, apparently shot down while flying over Britain, and therefore in itself a riddle. No state of war existed. Peace remained in this year 1937, fragile and tentative, but peace none the less.

The inexplicable German warplane was moving through time in diverse directions. Forward, at fractional speed, into its own oblivion, throwing up the sludge of the marsh in a fountain of vile spray, killing the occupants, detonating the store of bombs it carried in its bay and felling a giant swathe of Beckon Wood as it did so.

But it had also moved *back* through time, perplexingly, impossibly. Europe was at peace, Chancellor Hitler's armies of workers, thugs and soldiers were not as yet on the march, the boot of the tyrant was still at rest within the borders of the old Reich. The Nazi cry was for *lebensraum*, living space for the German race, and a deadly spreading of the nationalist poison through Europe must inevitably follow. Total war against Germany might indeed lie somewhere ahead, as the politicians warned, inevitably, devastatingly. As yet, though, in the quiet time in which I lived, Britain and Germany and much of Europe, clung to peace, brittle but miraculously persisting.

Out of that future, floating back to its own destructive destiny in the wood that grew in the grounds of my family's house, came this German bomber, victim of a machine-gun attack. By British defenders? How could I possibly tell? But it had fallen into my terrible domain, and consequently I had inadvertently sealed it in my present, slowing the plunge into its own final future.

I was a man of certainties: good and bad, order and chaos, liberty and death. These were my concerns. I cared

not for enigmas, even though this one could exert a deadly fascination over me.

I could feel the haruspical strength in me waning and knew I must hurry back to the house for Patricia Scragg's meal. In recent days a demon in me had sometimes urged me to delay while I regarded the German bomber. As the essential power of the pellets faded — my last meal had been eaten more than twelve hours before — so my ability to halt or reverse time failed in me. I knew that if I were simply to stand here at the fringe of Beckon Slough for the rest of the afternoon I would likely see the final destructive moments of the aircraft enacted before my eyes. The prospect of such a spectacle was an undeniable temptation.

I had other masters, though.

I turned and walked back through the trees towards the house. At the point where the track curved to the right, taking me out of sight of the plane, I turned to look back. The man in the cockpit was waving frantically at me, apparently urging me not to leave. I pondered his plight again for a few moments — nothing ever occurred in my life without mystical significance — but continued on towards the house.

Mrs Scragg's cooking was sufficient, but only just. Today she had soaked the pellets in a dark brown gravy, rather lumpy for my taste but otherwise acceptable. She was employed to provide me with food that gave nourishment, not pleasure. When I had prepared myself in the Great Hall she brought me the dish under its silver chafing lid, placed it before my seat at the long table and then hovered expectantly.

"Will there be anything else, Mr Owsley?"

"Not, I think, at present."

"A little later, perhaps?"

Her gaze was steady, determined. I said, "I don't know, Patricia. I have to work. If you could stay late this evening, maybe when I have finished...?"

Again, I knew I was hurtfully rejecting an overt offer, but now she had laid the pellets before me I was single-minded, as she must have known.

"Whatever pleases you, sir."

She left. I followed her to the double doors, trying to seem courteous, and closed them behind her.

I listened for the sound of her steps receding along the uncarpeted corridor, then I locked the doors and bolted them top and bottom. I gave them a forceful testing shake to be certain they were securely closed against her or anyone else who tried to interrupt what I was about to do. I put in place my secret anti-tamper seals, then returned to the dish waiting for me at the table.

I quickly removed the chafing cover and seasoned the food with several vigorous shakes of the pepper pot, and three long scoops with the knife into the mustard jar. With one last glance behind me to make certain I was not being observed I picked up the plate, dropped a knife and fork into my breast pocket, and went to the raised dais at the gallery end of the Hall. I worked the mechanism of the concealed door in the panelling of the wall and passed through into the hagnoscope that lay behind. I took up my position.

From here I was afforded a double view: the cell was a squint, to use the term that the original masons themselves

would have employed. On one side of me, through a slit cunningly contrived in the stone wall and the wooden panelling was a narrow, restricted view back into the Great Hall I had left moments before. It was only through this narrow aperture that the dim ambient light inside the hagio-scope arose. On the other side, through a much larger gap, a mere turn of the head away, was a glimpse into hell.

There was no light down there, in the great abyss lying beneath the Abbey. I could see nothing in the impenetrable black, nor was I intended to see. Whatever inhabited that sunken void required no light to give itself life. It, they, existed in a dark of such profundity that all human feeling or emotion was extinguished too. However, my presence in the hagio-scope enabled me, Janus-like, to sit at the gateway between past and present, guarding the way. Behind me, the present world; before me, the denizens of an ancient past and a deplorable future. I was suspended in time, like the dying aircraft that even now was arrested in the mire of Beckon Slough.

I was still cradling the plate of cooked meat. I knew that it was cooling quickly. Difficult to eat even when hot and freshly served, the pellets were nauseating if they were allowed to cool down. I retrieved the knife and fork from my pocket and began to eat the ragout as quickly as possible.

With Mrs Scragg's artful culinary techniques, and the more brutal coverings of spices I had latterly applied, the food was just about edible. Even so, it required an in-human will to be able to put the pellets in my mouth. Instinctively, for there were still vestiges of the human in me, I looked first for the smaller pieces, the ones most likely to have had their fibres cooked down into masticable form, or the ones which would yield easiest to the knife, or the ones which I could see had received the greatest share of the pepper. While I chewed steadily through the stuff, feeling the sense of evil power growing in me, I tried to distract myself with childish mnemonics — old nursery rhymes, playground chants — in a vain attempt to postpone the imminent confrontation, distract myself not only from the knowledge of what I was putting into my mouth, but also from the growing malignity that took shape whenever I ate.

I could unerringly sense the fiends of the nether world, rousing themselves for our fray, in the same way as I had to relish the rubbery gristle of the pellets and the vile flavours of death that were released with their juices.

Even so, I could take comfort from the consequence of the grotesque meal. I had the transcendent knowledge that time was being reversed by my actions, that evil was being repulsed and that the lurkers of the pit were being held back. On the colossal scale of the vasty death-universe, the delay was breathtakingly short, but enough, enough, all I could do. I alone, haruspex against evil.

Continuing life was my reward; life denied would be my punishment.

As I worked the meat between my jaws I began to sense action and reaction below. I heard discarnate screams, the fury of the frustrated malignity of evil embodied, of the dashing of whatever hopes such monstrous skulkers could entertain, as their slow attempts to claw their way up and out of the pit towards the surface of the world

were suddenly thwarted. Most of the meal would be used up pushing them back down to the level at which I had left them the day before, but with this new potency I believed there would be enough energy to force larger reversals on them. I chewed steadily, drawing every iota of flavour from the pellets, returning the beings whence they had come. Every time I swallowed I felt the peristaltic thrust of my oesophagus, forcing down the meat. My mind's eye glimpsed in fitful bursts the outlines of their noisome forms as they surrendered to the release of the death-force I was sucking from the pellets.

Their calling threats, echoing hoarsely around the slime-caked walls of the pit, gave aural shape to their forms!

They were low, flat, many-legged beings, each forelimb and hindlimb jointed at horrible double knees, like immense arthropods. Their limbs extruded to small claws, with which they flailed at the rubbery walls, trying to gain purchase. Each one of the beings was more than two yards in length, far too large for reason! I shuddered to perceive them! Their heads, sunk low towards the part that could only be the abdomen, were wreathed in cilla, flailing as the angry brows swung from side to side. They had deep mandibles, their maws perpetually slack-jawed and drooling, emitting their beastly howls of anger, vengeance and threat. And the rattling! How they clattered! Some large part of their arthropodic bodies was chitinous, perhaps a loosely connected cuticle or carapace, so that each thrusting step produced a loud, ghastly clicking as they moved their ill-formed frames. It was the cacophony of sticks, of staves flailed against each other, of bones breaking in a yard.

And their relentless, ineluctable climbing would bring them, if not halted or at least given pause, into the world of men, women and children. I and only I stood before these denizens of the pit, barring their way, reversing their quest for escape.

Into this, my long-suffered private world of struggle with stasis, had come by some freakish chance a modern-day intrusion. It was itself as baffling as the creeping horrors I was doomed to obstruct. Somehow, from a militarized future that was conceivable only to a few, had appeared a German warplane. This, shot down and crashing into the Beckon Slough, had become frozen by the same distortions of time that I, haruspical mystic, used to repel the underworld invaders. What was the link?

Because I could never see the dwellers of the world beneath me, inevitably I often wondered whether my loathsome toil might be the product of delusion. Only I, aberrant haruspex from an ancient family of mystics, scholars, clairvoyants, contemplatives, could deal with the threat they presented, but equally it was only my family who had divined their presence.

The crashing German warplane was the first evidence of third-party recognition, incomprehensible though it might be. The plane must have come to Beckon Abbey either because I was in it, or because the pit was to be found beneath it. Now, whether or not this was the intention, it was held frozen in time not unlike the way the repugnant dwellers of the pit were halted.

Furthermore, I knew, as I chewed stoically on the pellets, that not only were the malignant beasts being forced back

into their abyss, so the warplane too would at this moment be inching back in time, plotting a reversal of its catastrophic arrival. First it would sink briefly but necessarily into the mud, where its broken components would start to reassemble, then there would come an abrupt and cataclysmic reverse lifting out of the mud, and it would begin the long backwards tracing of its crash from the sky.

Seven days before, while cheerlessly consuming the pellets of last week's inferior consignment, I had found entirely by chance a uniquely potent example. In devouring it I recognized that the disturbing potency within was having a powerful effect on the arthropodous horrors inside the pit. The moment the eating ritual had been completed I rushed down to the Slough to see for myself. I found I had managed to reverse the bomber's path so far that the doomed machine was actually hovering briefly in the air above the mire, returning for an inert instant to its rôle as a dweller of the skies. Both of its propellers were intact at this moment before final impact (and to my perception slowly turning), but from the nacelle of the engine on my side was streaming some kind of transparent liquid, presumably the fuel, and behind that a searing whiteness of flame, and flowing behind that was a long trail of black smoke. This traced the aircraft's final path: an almost straight line backwards and up at an angle of some forty-five degrees to the horizontal, past the treetops, into the blue sky, into the unseen flying formation of its fellow bombers, and, for all I knew, back thence into the heart of the German nation.

It was this action of mine that had alerted the man in the cockpit. He had been invisible to me until that day, presumably crouching or lying on the floor, but in some amazing way he had become aware of my actions. Ever since then, his signalling for help had been distraught and constant.

As the days passed, and I eked out my supply of pellets, the Heinkel had gradually returned to its inexorable collision with the bog, while the man within gestured towards me with increasing consternation. Soon the plane had reached the position in which I had seen it this morning, not more than a second or two from its final destruction.

For the first time I had a kind of yardstick to judge my progress. It had seemed to me until today that if I allowed the aircraft to continue on into oblivion the other struggle too would end, but in that case with the catastrophic escape of the horrors into the world. This was the true significance to me of the new consignment of pellets.

I was saving the largest, juiciest, most deadly pellet to last. Earlier in the meal, as I began eating, I had sensuously stroked the cutting edge of my knife across it and nothing of its sinewy texture had succumbed. It was tough, perfectly shaped! A streak of gristle, unreduced by Mrs Scragg's cooking, ran through it from side to side. When I finally took the pellet into my mouth, whole, as it had been found, it was the gristle that produced the tensile strength. It stayed stubbornly in my mouth, distending and bulging while I chewed, but retaining its overall shape. Juices in it were nevertheless released, and as I worked horribly at my task I could taste their exotic menace as they flowed over my tongue.

The final pellet at last produced a reaction from one of my enemies lurking in the dark. In my mind, a dread familiar voice:

"Owsley, Owsley, abandon this work and surrender to the pit!"

"Leave me!" I cried aloud.

"You can never prevail," came the mentally perceived tones of my accuser. "Flesh is weak, life is short, we are forever! Tighten your gut muscles, Owsley!"

"I shall not!"

"Do you not feel the nausea creeping within you? Do you not taste the fleshly residues of what you have consumed? Are they not churning within you, indigestible, disgusting, sickening, wrenching your gut into coils of vomitory? Puke up the cancers, Owsley! Vomit them up!"

I lurched back from the gap that led to hell. I could hardly breathe and nausea had me in its grip. If I stayed where I was I would doubtless spew up everything I had eaten, as often before I had found myself doing. But if I did eject the half-digested tumours all my work would be undone. This my hellish interlocutor knew full well. He came for me on most days, but always when my haruspical





work was being most effective. If I were to vomit up the epitheliomata of the meal I would lose almost everything I had just achieved.

So I retreated. The only way I could ignore the terrible voice was to leave the hagioscope, and this I did.

Once I had regained the comparative normality of the Great Hall, it was not difficult to regain control over the feelings of nausea. After I had taken several deep breaths I made sure that the concealed door had closed firmly behind me, and also that no one had entered the Great Hall while I had been in the hagioscope. I lit a candle and hurried to the main door to check the locks, then examined my secretly placed seals, a disturbance to which would reveal if someone had tried to force their way in. Of course, only Mrs Scragg was generally with me at the house, and she could probably be trusted, but the way time was dilated by my struggles inside the hagioscope meant I had to be sure. Hours of subjective time could pass imperceptibly, because my own sense of it was as distorted by the ingestion of the cancers as was that of the devilish creatures I was repulsing.

Now it had become night and the Hall was in darkness. I remembered my half-promise of an assignation with Patricia Scragg when I had completed my work, but there was no sign of her. She normally left the Abbey halfway through the afternoon, and today would probably not be prepared to face what might be a third rejection.

Thoughts of her were distracting me. The important matter was that the pit was secure again, or reasonably so, and would remain in that condition until the next day at least. If the new intestinal epithelial pellets were as powerful as I suspected, it was even possible that another visit to the squint might not be necessary until the day after.

I moved swiftly around the Great Hall, lighting more candles, pulling the blinds across the tall windows, blocking out the night, the glimpse of the moon and the stars, but most of all the white ground-mist that moved in across the valley at this time of the year, to lie like a winding-sheet across the grounds of the Abbey.

After I had checked once more that the door to the hagioscope was sealed, I went through the gloomy corridors to the domestic wing of the house, returning my platter, glass and cutlery to the scullery. Of Mrs Scragg there was still no sign. I left everything by the sink, then ascended to my apartment on the second floor. I stripped off all my clothes (as usual at this time of day they were sodden with old sweat and the seams scuffed uncomfortably against my flesh), and immersed myself in a bath of hot water.

When I went into my chamber afterwards, Patricia Scragg was there. She had lit my paraffin lamps and was waiting by the side of my bed, naked but for the sheet she held against her body. I glared at her, resenting her persistence, but even so unable to deny the animal lusts she aroused in me. She lowered the sheet so that I might gaze at her body. I relished the sight of her tired face, her pale heavy thighs, her dimpled elbows and knees, the girdle of fat about her waist, her large drooping breasts, the pasture of black curling bristle at the junction of her legs where soon I would gladly graze. I placed my hands on her shoulders, then ran my tongue down her face and body, pausing to nuzzle on her heavy breasts with their tiny but tempting lumps of hard fibre buried deep within. I pushed her down on the bed and quickly serviced her, thrusting with greedy passion at her ample body.

I was exhausted afterwards, but my need to study was constant, so leaving Patricia Scragg to make her own way out of the house I pulled on my reading gown. With tremendous weariness of tread I went up to the next floor to the library. Here I took down several volumes of psychology: on the meaning of revenge, of fear, of repulsion. I glanced through them drowsily in the inadequate lamplight for half an hour. My books were the sole comfort of my life, but so drained was I by the encounter in the hagioscope, and by satisfying Patricia Scragg's agitated sexual needs, that I found it impossible to concentrate.

Later I returned to my chamber and slept.

In the morning I discovered a singular fact: part of one of the pellets from the day before had been packed between two of my lower back teeth and was still firmly in place. Neither pushing at it with my tongue nor scraping with a

finger nail could dislodge it. When I had dressed I took a match, broke off the head to make a tiny jagged spear, and tried to pick out the compacted meat with that. Again, no success, but I did finally manage to shift it far enough to release some of the juices that by some marvel it still contained. They trickled across my taste buds.

Twelve minutes flashed by in a subjective moment! I checked the lapse of time, then returned the watch to my waistcoat pocket, still only half-believing that the act of consuming necrotic flesh should have such a potent effect on my mind. No matter how frequently the time distortion occurred it invariably astonished me.

I realized I was entering a familiar state of mind, in which starkest gloom jostled with boundless optimism. I therefore decided to measure the effect of the pellets I had eaten the previous day. Since it had obtruded itself into my life, the German bomber had come to signify a kind of yardstick of temporal motion. Its advances and reverses were a guide to the progress of the main conflict. Now that I had realized this connection it made no sense to subject myself needlessly to the torments of the pit. I could gain the reassurance I sought with much less risk to my sanity.

It was raining when I left the house and the crisp frosts of the previous few days were no more. The sloping sward of the Long Lawn was already sodden in its lower reaches. I was glad to reach the cinder path that led into the trees.

The Slough, when I came to it, lay undisturbed, the surface calm and untrammelled, apart from the constant patterns of overlapping circles made by the rain on the few stretches of clear water. Above the muddy water, a precious few inches above it, lay the plummeting body of the doomed warplane. At once my spirits lifted! The latent power of the pellets now in my possession was beyond doubt.

In the latest manifestation, the aircraft was more or less physically intact, not counting the visible damage the machine-gun rounds had caused to the cockpit cover and engine cowling. Both wings were attached, and although the spilling fuel, the blazing fire and the black smoke streamed back from the engine, it was possible to see it as still a fighting plane, not a broken wreck.

The tip of the wing closer to me — the one that I knew within a second or two of real time would break off catastrophically as the plane ploughed into the mud — was only two or three inches from the solid ground on which I stood.

A single session in the hagioscope, and this! One meal of the new pellets! Fifty or sixty more such pieces still to come!

Was it at last the final stage of the bitter struggle against the chaos of the pit?

Then, immediately banishing the heady optimism, a voice said in my mind, "Get me out of here!"

It was the same voice as that familiar, loathsome cry from the heart of the pit. My first thought: *It cannot be!* Had the monster found a way to track me beyond the hagioscope, away from the house, to here?

It came again, more urgently, "I am about to perish! I implore you! The canopy is jammed! Can't you do something?"

I realized that it was the helmeted figure who stood in the cockpit. His face was pressed desperately against the perspex panes of the cockpit cover and both of his arms were reaching up, struggling to release the catches that held it in place. His movements were frenzied, panicky.

"I can't help you!" I shouted at him.

"Yes you can! Find something with which to release me. I beg you! Save me from this!"

"What are you?" I cried. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I am an emissary from the future."

I am strong with mysticism, not with physical or muscular development. The predicament of the man on the aircraft wrenched at me, but it was not in my power to assist him. He wanted me to wrestle with the jammed cockpit cover? Or to try to cut my way through the metal side of the fuselage? I regarded him across the short distance that separated us. He was locked in a time and destiny of his own, an alien intruder, subject to the will of a universe fundamentally different from mine.

His voice came at me repeatedly, a sane but desperate plea for help. Wondering what if anything I could do, I stood there regarding him, playing at the soreness of my gum with the tip of my tongue, fretting at the piece of pellet that had become lodged in my teeth the day before. It seemed to have worked a little more loose since waking this morning, and when I sucked at it I distinctly felt it shift. Still watching the man in the aircraft I picked at the fragment of meat with the nail of my ring finger, and in a moment it was out. The familiar essence lifted like gas against my taste sensors.

The plane moved back.

"You are who I am seeking!" the voice cried in my mind. "You are Owsley!"

"I am."

I recoiled with shock from the discovery that he knew my name!

"And you are haruspical!" he called.

"I am."

Now he stood erect, abandoning his panicky efforts to release the cockpit cover. His demeanour was strangely calm. "You must release me if you can. You doubtless know why."

"I believe I do," I said, responding to the composure that had come over him and which was also now surrounding me. "But there are questions —"

"None matters!"

"How did you —?"

"Owsley, be silent!" His mood had abruptly changed again. "Release me from this aircraft! Then perhaps we might have reasons to converse."

Disliking the authoritative tone, yet even so respecting it, I turned away from him and followed the long path back in the direction of the Abbey. I looked around me as I walked, hoping to spot something hard and heavy and made of metal. Nothing offered itself as suitable. When I entered the house I noticed at once from the clock in the stairwell that more time had fled while the pellet juices flowed in my mouth. It was already past noon and as I went along the ground floor corridors I glimpsed Mrs Scragg pacing impatiently in the short passage outside the kitchen. Fortu-

nately, she happened to have her back towards me at that moment, so I was able to pass unseen beyond her.

In the utility room, after a search, I found a long steel spanner or wrench, I knew not which, apparently left behind by a workman at some time in the past. I assumed it would be sufficient for the task of breaking through the thick perspex, but my skills, as I say, are not those of the physical body. As I carried the heavy implement back down the lawns towards Beckon Wood I felt self-conscious with it and knew that it hung at an unnatural angle in my grasp. The weather was still cold and unpleasant: it was raining persistently and the damp twigs on the drooping branches of the trees brushed against my face and hair. As I followed the bend in the path and again saw Beckon Slough, I raised the spanner in my hand. Holding it before me I strode across the muddy ground to the site of the wreck.

The man remained standing within the cockpit, calm and poised, awaiting my return. I went to where the tip of the wing hovered a few inches above the muddy ground.

"While you were gone," the man said, in my mind, "I was trying to establish how best to force the canopy."

"Don't you know already?" I said, facing him.

"Why should I?"

"You are a member of the Air Force, are you not? The German *Luftwaffe*?"

My mind seemed to laugh mockingly. "I, an aviator? I have never before been inside such a thing. I am a man of learning and of the spirit, as you."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Tomas Bauer. You, I know, are James Owsley." Amazement stirred again in me, but at once the man added, "Of course, you are the one I have travelled to find."

Since the death of my father I had known that I was upholding a tradition, one that I had to honour, and one which eventually I should have to pass on to another. I had expected, though, that such release would not come for many years or decades. Tomas Bauer's words, and the mystical circumstances of his arrival, informed me that the moment had come. Waves of relief, excitement and a distinct tremor of fear passed through me.

However, the immediate problem remained of what to do to release Tomas Bauer from the aircraft. I was still holding the spanner aloft, but the feeling of foolish physical ineptitude was still paralysing me.

I heard in my mind, "James Owsley, you must do as I direct. No more words!"

I tried to assent, but it was as if a sponge flooded with chloroform had been pressed irresistibly over my mind, making it insensible. I felt myself propelled forward, raising my right foot like an automaton to step on the very tip of the wing itself. It took my weight, without dipping. I stepped forward and walked across the curved upper surface of the wing towards the bullet-riven cockpit. When I reached the curved housing of the engine I had to scramble over the hot metal case, carefully not placing any part of my body in the dangerous stream of escaping fuel. The propeller, still turning slowly a few inches away from me as I passed, set up a torrent of forced air behind it, neither to my perception moving nor turbulent but somehow compressed by the rotation of the airscrew.

Then I was against the side of the cockpit cover itself, looking in at the man who had taken control of my mind. Tomas had removed his leather helmet and I could see his features clearly. He was a young man, tall and ruggedly built, with a shock of blond hair and a sturdily jutting jaw. He stared at me with an intent frown, exercising his mental will against mine.

There was a part of the transparent canopy where two panels of it overlaid each other, apparently the place where the two halves joined after the front part had been slid forward and locked in position. Tomas directed me towards it. I slipped the edge of the spanner against what crack I could see, then heaved at it with all my might, trying to use it as a lever.

When the thick perspex did not shift I felt my arms swing backwards, raising the spanner above my head. I brought it down with a tremendous blow, one far more heavy than anything I would have believed myself capable before now. The cockpit cover shattered at once, a large star-shaped hole appearing in the flattened top. Three more blows forced an irregular aperture large enough for a man to escape through.

I reached down and held Tomas's arms as he found footholds in the cramped cockpit and pushed himself up and through to freedom. As he clambered around I could not help looking down and past him, to where I could see the bodies of the two German aviators. The one in the left-hand seat had clearly suffered a direct hit from a bullet, because a large part of his helmet and skull had been broken away. He was slumped against his dashboard of instruments. I could see a bulge of blood rising through the gap in his head and knew it soon to be a fountaining gout to join the soak of blood that already covered his flying suit. From this evidence of a pumping heart I realized that the pilot must be, in a way, still alive. The other aviator, who outwardly appeared uninjured, although my view of him was restricted, also was leaning forward with his face against the instruments. His body was broken in some horrible way I shrank from trying to imagine. I had to assume he was dead or unconscious, even though there were no apparent wounds on him.

While I was regarding this disagreeable sight with a sense of increasing horror, Tomas had climbed swiftly out of the cockpit and was standing on the wing beside me. He tugged at my arm, swinging me round.

"We leave," he said peremptorily. These were the first words he had so far uttered while I had a clear sight of his face. As I hastened to follow him, down the wing and through the turbulent stream of compressed air behind the propeller, I realized that the words I was hearing in my mind were not the same as those forming in his mouth. The words did not move with his lips.

As I thought about this, he instantly replied, "I speak in German. You will hear, I believe, English. It is the same for me, in reverse. It is best, I think."

He jumped down from the wing. After a few uncertain steps on the muddy bank of the Slough he strode off along the cinder pathway. His long black coat swung in the air behind him. Now he was freed from the aircraft he was walking with easy, powerful grace, like an athlete. From his gait I would not have credited that he was haruspical:

others of my calling that I had met were, like me, small in stature, bookish, introspective, timid in all matters that required strenuous activity. Tomas had implied that he was no better equipped to contend with problems of the physical world — otherwise, surely, he could have escaped from that plane without my help? — but even so nature had apparently blessed him with a strong and agile body.

When we reached the part of the path where I normally struck up the Long Lawn towards the house, Tomas Bauer came to a halt. He turned towards me as I caught up with him. The dark shape of the Abbey, squatting on the brow of Beckon Hill, loomed up behind him. He extended a hand of friendship towards me.

"I thank you James Owsley," he said, and now that I was only a few inches away from him I found distracting the dissonance there was between the words I heard and the movements of his lips. "To you I owe my life."

"Why were you on the aircraft?" I said. "It makes no sense to me. Where was the aircraft going and who sent it? How was it shot down? How did you contrive it to crash on my property? What — ?"

He held up the palms of his hands to silence me.

"Nor does it make sense to me," he said. "I was in Germany, you are in England. The war was running its course and I could find no other way to reach England — "

"To which war do you refer?"

"The war between our two countries, of course."

"There is no war," I said. "True, there are portents, but the German Chancellor would not be so insane — "

"He is mad enough," said Tomas. "You can be sure of that. In my time his madness has led to a war that is engulfing most of Europe. It is irrelevant to the greater struggle, the one in which you and I engage, but there is no avoiding it for practical matters. I was effectively trapped in my homeland, while my true work was here. The German army is poised to invade England — "

"But this is fantasy!" I cried.

"To you it might seem so. But I speak of what is a grim reality of the time in which I live. Four, maybe five years from this moment. Madness? Yes it is! Engines of war are turning, but they are not such deadly machineries as the ones you and I face. We confront a larger madness, a virulent incursion whose terrors would dwarf in significance a mere military conquest by one nation of another. You reside above the pit of hell and its denizens seek release. The portents have been written in texts since the dawn of time. I have studied many such texts and so, I know, have you. Our task is beyond history! War, pestilence, genocide, famine...these are trivial concerns, compared with what we confront! I had no alternative: I had to escape to England to be with you. After much doubt I came to the conclusion that the only way was to travel with one of the planes that was flying to bomb your English towns. I knew there would be risks, but in my desperation I saw no alternative."

"You raise more questions than you answer," I said.

"And I have told you they are of no account. I am here; that is sufficient. Are we at last to unite and engage together in our struggle against the creatures of the pit?"

"In my life there is no other concern," I said.

"Nor in mine. So we must address ourselves to it."

He turned from me and strode purposefully up the lawn towards the Abbey. Once again I found myself following in his wake. His manner was decisive, arrogant, imperious. He behaved as if I had been merely caretaking the house until the moment of his arrival. As I trotted behind him, already furious with myself for allowing him to dominate me, flashing memories of the years I had endured alone were shining in my mind, almost dazzling me. Was Tomas Bauer somehow projecting them at me?

No matter the source: I could not ignore them. I remembered the first time my father took me into the squint, so that I might experience the raw evil of the pit's emanations and truly learn what it would mean to follow him there. He thrust my face against the opening so that I had to stare down into the merciless dark-





ness, and while he held me with his knee against the small of my back he began an endless braying sermon. His leg moved up and down against me, his yelling voice becoming a terrifying stridulation. It was a new and stunning insight into my father. When I managed to free myself and struggle round to face him in the confined space of the hagnoscope, he was looming over me, lit from all sides by the candles that guttered from every crevice in the rock walls. He bellowed his ranting, maniacal entreaties into the pit, swaying horribly from side to side, a Bible held aloft in one hand, a glistening golden crucifix in the other.

I also could not forget the physical aftereffect that the first experience had on me: the long hours that followed while I retched disconsolately into the pewter bowl beside my bed, a purging that was a making-ready of my body for the fray that on some dark level it must have known would be coming. Then there were those few precious weeks when my father allowed me to work alongside him, and when I, in my naïveté, had believed he was encouraging me and that we would work together for years to come.

I did not realize straight away that his sudden interest in me was only a preliminary to a greater event: his resolution suddenly collapsed and he subsided into insanity. The disintegration of his will happened, so it seemed, overnight. Another glimpse of memory: a terrible confrontation with him in the Great Hall, when in the boiling rage of his madness he beset me with what he interpreted as my sacrilegious mystical leanings and physically threw at me the entrails on which I had been preparing the day's labours in the pit, challenging me to consume them while he watched. Impossible, of course. He desperately wanted me to follow him, but my calling stood like a barrier between us, blocking his sight of me.

After this confrontation, a hiatus. There was my father gibbering quietly and in solitude while nurses worked in relays to minister to his needs, while I stood alone at the gate of the pit, attempting for the first time to thwart the malignant ones below in the only way I knew, and not doing too well. My father's death came as a release for me. Mostly at first it was a release from the guilt that I felt about our relationship, but in more practical terms his death freed the financial fruits of the estate. These were now mine to enjoy. Before his decline, while he yet retained ambitions for me, my father had had the foresight to endow a family Trust to finance an independent pathology research laboratory in a London clinic. This act not only revealed to me that in his last months he had come to terms with what I might be capable of, but also ensured that our family's material wealth, otherwise so ineffectual against the denizens of the sunken world, could be applied to the production of a steady supply of scientifically reliable epitheliomata.

The first consignment of cancerous bowel growths and malignant intestinal tumours had arrived at Beckon Abbey within three weeks of my father's burial. Thereafter they were delivered at a rate of approximately one package every ten days. The supply was erratic, both in haruspical suitability and in time of delivery, but in recent weeks both matters had greatly improved.

All this was mine. My life, my sacrifice, my commitment and dedication. My father, his father, the generations of the family before us; we had all stood at the dreadful portal and resisted the earthly incursion of the Old Ones.

Now Tomas Bauer had entered our private hell. He arrived in a bizarre warping of time and space, stepping out of some unimaginable future, then arrogantly removed my sense of primacy. I watched him as he walked ahead of me. His able body took him in swift strides up the Long Lawn to the house, while I, the overweight and physically frail product of a lifetime of poring over books and of consuming protein-rich foods, was soon a considerable distance behind him and in a great deal of discomfort. I never ran or exercised, rarely took my body to its limits. My energies had to be conserved for my work. My only physical activity was the hasty, frenzied, irregular satisfaction of Patricia Scragg's sexual needs.

Tomas reached the door on this garden side of the house and passed within as if he had been accustomed to going in and out of my house for all his life. I was so far behind him that by the time I stumbled up to the door, winded and dishevelled, he had been inside for two or three minutes. I allowed the door to slam closed behind me. I leaned against the jamb, coughing helplessly while I

tried unsuccessfully to steady my breathing. I looked feebly into the vestibule that opened out in this part of the building. Sweat was streaming down my temples and into my collar and every inhalation was a painful labour. I could feel my heart pounding like a fist within my chest cavity, beating to be released.

Tomas Bauer had already ascended the flight of steps that led to the upper hallway, from which, after passing along a wide corridor where most of my family's art treasures were displayed, he would eventually gain access to the Great Hall and the terrors within. He was standing on the top step of the flight and Patricia Scragg was with him. I could not hear his voice, but she was nodding compliantly. She heard my arrival and glanced down the stairs towards me. As our eyes briefly met I heard Tomas's mentally projected voice:

"—from now, if you please, Herr Owsley is no longer—"

The weirdly disembodied voice faded again as she turned away, like a lighthouse beam sweeping by. I heard her say, in English, "Very well, sir. I understand."

I called up to her, "What is it you understand, Mrs Scragg?"

She made no answer, but the newcomer inclined his head more closely to hers, speaking softly and urgently. As he did so she turned again to look down the steps in my direction, a look of conspiratorial attention on her face. Although the lids of her eyes were suggestively half closed, the fact that she again turned towards me accidentally opened up his words through her consciousness.

He was saying, "— tonight it will change, for I have ransacked his mind and I know what he is to you, but now you are mine, if you come to me when I will, I shall take you as mine, for you are the ravishing prize I have sought in return for the sacrifice I make in this quest, but you will be rewarded with such pleasures as you cannot easily imagine, for I have the power —"

And on, glibly and pressingly, suggestions and innuendos and flattering promises. I heard them all until the moment when at last she looked away from me and the torrent of intimations was silenced.

I was recovering my wind at last and I began to mount the stairs.

"Patricia," I called. "What is he saying to you?"

She glanced at me again (his oleaginous insinuations had temporarily ceased), and she said, "Mr Owsley, I must ask you not to approach!"

"I am still the master of the house, Patricia," I said. "I want you to accord our visitor every courtesy, but you will continue to take instructions only from me."

She spoke, but I knew at once that the words were not hers. She was mouthing them on behalf of Tomas Bauer. Her voice had taken on a deeper timbre than usual.

She said (Tomas said), "You have failed to stem the tide of evil that flows beneath this mound. Your efforts have been insufficient to the task. I shall assume responsibility. You may assist me if you wish, but I should prefer you to stay away. This is no longer a matter for your family, but concerns the world. It is my mission to seal the pit forever."

"You don't know how!" I shouted. "You have no experience!"

He stared directly at me.

"No experience? What then is this?" With both of his strong hands he ripped at the front of his tunic, pulling it open. The buttons on his shirt followed, and his broad, hairless chest was revealed. A misshapen, reddened mound disfigured the area around his left aureole and a grotesquely enlarged nipple drooped horribly. Brown traces of a stain from some bodily discharge lay on the pale skin beneath. "You, haruspex, have consumed many such tumours. But this one, I say, is upon me and within me and it is consuming me. What better way is there to know evil than to have it upon you? And you say I know nothing!"

I was, in truth, stunned by his revelation. Tears were welling in his eyes and his head was shaking uncontrollably, as if with a nervous tic. His chest rose and fell with his suddenly stertorous breathing. I knew beyond question that he was not deceiving me. His bared chest made him vulnerable, piteous, the red carcinomatous flare marking his flesh like the petals of a burgeoning flower. He was a man who already stood on the brink of his own hellish pit.

"Tomas," I said after a long silence. "Would we not be better co-operating?"

"I think not. I am here to take your place, Owsley."

I detected, though, a softening of tone, a decrease in his arrogance.

"But surely —" I indicated his infected chest. "How long can you survive?"

"Long enough. Or do you propose to eat my entrails too?"

I was shocked again, this time by the candour of his reply. It did mean, as he had claimed, that in addition to placing words in my mind he could listen back to what I was thinking. I had been unable to suppress my inner excitement when I saw the rich potential of the tumour he had revealed on his breast. Doubtless he had sensed that too.

"Eventually, I should have to," I admitted. "You must know that, Tomas. You are haruspical too."

"Not as you."

"You eat human flesh!"

Mrs Scragg gasped and turned away from us both. Tomas grabbed her arm, and spun her around.

"To your work, woman! Never mind what methods we use. I am hungry! I have not eaten in days."

She looked imploringly at me. "Mr Owsley, is this right?"

"Do as he instructs, Patricia."

"You concede my mastery, then?" cried Tomas, looking directly at me. Triumph charged his eyes.

"Mrs Scragg, prepare the next meal," I said. "You may use the usual ingredients. Places should be laid for two. We shall dine in the Great Hall."

I noticed she hesitated for a second or two longer. I recalled our usual conversations at this point when we discussed the way in which she was to prepare the pellets, but I nodded noncommittally at her and she left. Tonight of all nights I was prepared to let her cook in whatever way she felt best.

Feeling that a new understanding had been reached with Tomas Bauer, and even that some sympathy might be possible between us, I climbed the remainder of the steps to join him. He had lost interest in me, though, and was already striding away. Maddened again by his disdainful

behaviour, first seemingly vulnerable, then almost without warning as overbearing as ever, I at first made to follow him but immediately decided against it.

Instead, I went downstairs, walked through to the kitchen to speak quietly to Patricia Scragg, then went to my library. I closed and locked the door, and with a dread feeling that Tomas Bauer would inevitably know what I was doing took out the final volume of my father's irreplaceable set of haruspical grimoires, written in Latin.

The task of translation, started by his own grandfather and as yet only partly accomplished, was familiar and necessary, but also unfinishable. I sought only distraction. The abstruseness of the text never did help me concentrate at the best of times and on this evening my mind was racing with feelings of anxiety and conflict. I knew Tomas Bauer was somewhere in the Abbey, prowling around, investigating every corner of the old building. At odd moments I could detect his thoughts, and they came at me in distracting bursts of non-sequitur. Fear was coursing through me: it was almost as if one of the monsters below had at last broken out of the pit and invaded this continuum of reality. Tomas's intrusion was of that magnitude. Nothing was going to be the same again.

Unless he died. I could not rid myself of the memory of his horribly inflamed chest, the cancer bursting through the flesh and skin. It was surely a terminal ailment? If so, how long would it be before he became too ill to function?

Was his inexplicable arrival from 'the future' connected somehow with his illness? From what was he really trying to escape when he travelled to England? Did he have one final destiny to fulfil? Was it involved with my haruspical mysticism, so that, in effect, it was not he himself who was taking control but the cancer he bore?

Mrs Scragg came hesitantly to the door of the library, calling my name. I laid aside the precious tome with a sense of finality and eased open the door. The candle flames bent to the side of their wicks in the sudden draught from the corridor, and wax ran in floods down the guttered stems.

"The meal is ready, Mr Owsley," she said. "Do you still want me to serve it in the Great Hall?"

"Yes, I do. I shall have to unlock the door for you."

"Sir, that's what concerns me. Our visitor has already found a way inside."

"He is in the hall *alone*?"

"I could do nothing about it. I knew you would be angry."

"Very well, Patricia. I am not angry with you. Is the food ready to be eaten?"

"As I said."

"And you have prepared two portions?" She nodded, and I regarded her thoughtfully. "If the meal is still in the kitchen, let me come with you so that I might inspect it —"

A voice came: "If you are thinking of tampering, Owsley..."

Mrs Scragg and I both started with surprise. I know not what was in her thoughts, but to me it was further proof that the end of my era as custodian must almost be upon me. Tomas Bauer had invaded everything and I could not function like that. The feelings that welled up in me were a confusion of relief, dismay and anger.

When we reached the kitchen Mrs Scragg took up the large jappanned tray bearing the dishes and we both set off

towards the Great Hall. I scurried before her to push open and hold each of the doors along the corridors. When we reached the entrance to the Hall I saw that the reinforced locks had been burst asunder by main force. I immediately saw Tomas within, standing in an aggressive manner with his arms folded and his legs braced, staring at the place from where the hagnoscope viewed the room.

I said quietly to Mrs Scragg, "As soon as you have left the Hall, I want you to collect your personal belongings and depart the house. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr Owsley."

"I suggest you do it as soon as possible. Do not delay for anything."

"When should I return?"

I was about to reply that Tomas Bauer would surely let her know, when his supplanting voice burst into my mind.

"I'll call her when and if I'm ready! Bring the food!"

"Let me take the tray," I said to Mrs Scragg. "You should leave at once."

Her gaze briefly met mine. I had never before seen such a frank, unguarded look from her.

"I shouldn't say it, sir, but the best of good fortune to you."

"Fortune is not what I want, Patricia, but I thank you for that. I need strength, and the resolve to stand up to this man."

Tomas Bauer was moving towards us, so I turned decisively away from her and walked into the main part of the Hall. Tomas indicated with his hand that I should carry the tray to the long oaken table, then he stepped close beside me as I walked nervously across the polished boards of the floor. I set down the tray and lifted away the chafing covers. I saw at once that Patricia had done us proud, and prepared all the most powerful of the pellets. She had cooked them by the simplest of means, boiling them up with a selection of garden vegetables into a stew which would be appetizing were it not for the main ingredient.

Tomas Bauer said in my mind, "In spite of what you think, I am here to salute you, James Owsley. In your country, honour is for many people a matter of pride, and to others self-sacrifice is a privilege. Although I have come to replace you, it is not out of contempt. How may I best show my esteem?"

"Why can we not work together?" I said. "This talk of replacing me is inappropriate. You have come at a moment when I am certain the course of the battle is about to turn. Look at what lies before us." I gently waved the palm of my hand above the protein-rich stew that Patricia Scragg had cooked for us. "To work beside me would be the greatest honour you could pay me."

"That would not be possible," Tomas said, and I sensed a trace of sadness in his tone. "Your way is not the right way. You have to depart."

"Can I not even show you of what I am capable?" I said. "Let us take our meal into the hagnoscope and partake of it together. Then you will realize how the fiends' movements inside the pit will not only be reversed, but placed so far back that a final sealing of the pit might conceivably be possible, and soon."

Tomas replaced the chafing lids on the plates.

"Let us indeed visit the hagnoscope," he said. "But not for what you propose. I must inspect the pit for myself, try

to comprehend it. I have to set about plan-ning my defence against whatever it contains.”

Once again I found my own ideas and wishes swept aside by his imperious manner. He thrust one of the covered plates into my hands, then took the other and walked steadfastly towards the entrance to the squint. I followed, my heart already beating faster in anticipation of confronting again what I knew was beyond its narrow confines.

It turned out that although Tomas clearly knew of the existence of the hagio-scope, and indeed its approximate position in the wall, he had not worked out how to gain entrance to it. He made me show him how to operate the concealed mechanism, then tried it for himself once or twice. With the main panel set to one side he glanced briefly into the space beyond, before stepping aside to allow me to enter first. I already knew that there was only enough comfortable space for one person at a time, so as Tomas squeezed in behind me I was already pressing myself against the cold stone wall at the back. The aperture that opened to the pit was at my shoulder and I could hear once again the familiar and disgusting movements of the beasts below. Inexplicably, they seemed much closer than ever before. I had spent too much time, too much energy, releasing this man from the crashing plane. How I regretted that!

“Sir, I request you to eat,” Tomas said in my mind.

I raised my arms awkwardly, trying to manoeuvre the plate around to a position in which I could take away the chafing cover again, but to do so meant I had to pass it directly in front of Tomas Bauer’s face. To my amazement he jerked his forehead sharply forward, banging the plate in my hand, making it spin away in the confined space. The pellets, my precious and powerful tumours, burst out wetly in their gravy and spilled messily down my clothes and on the dark floor.

I smelt Tomas’s breath, so close was his face to mine. In the wan light that seeped in from the Hall I could see his face, maniacally grinning.

“You will never have to taste your beloved pellets again, Owsley. Your purpose is more personal.” He was still holding his own plate and as he forced his body round in the cramped space he was able to place the dish on the narrow stone shelf I had myself been trying to reach. “I shall come to those later, if they remain necessary. First, you must eat, sir, and do so until you are replete!”

“You have spilled my plate!” I cried.

“And deliberately!”

To my horror, Tomas once again ripped open the fastenings of his shirt and exposed his diseased chest to me. It was only six inches away from my face. The efflorescence of his cancerous breast gleamed in the dim light from the Hall. I madly glimpsed chasing patterns of conflict: life against death, blood pumping through diseased cells, grisly malignant tendrils reaching out like pollen-laden anthers to impregnate the as-yet normal flesh that surrounded the deathly bloom.

Neither of us moved, while I regarded this object of allure and repulsion. A thrill of anticipation was pouring through me like liquid fire.

Tomas raised both his hands and put them behind my head, a gesture that was partly a restraint, partly a caress. When he spoke next his words had a tender quality that until this moment I had never heard from him.

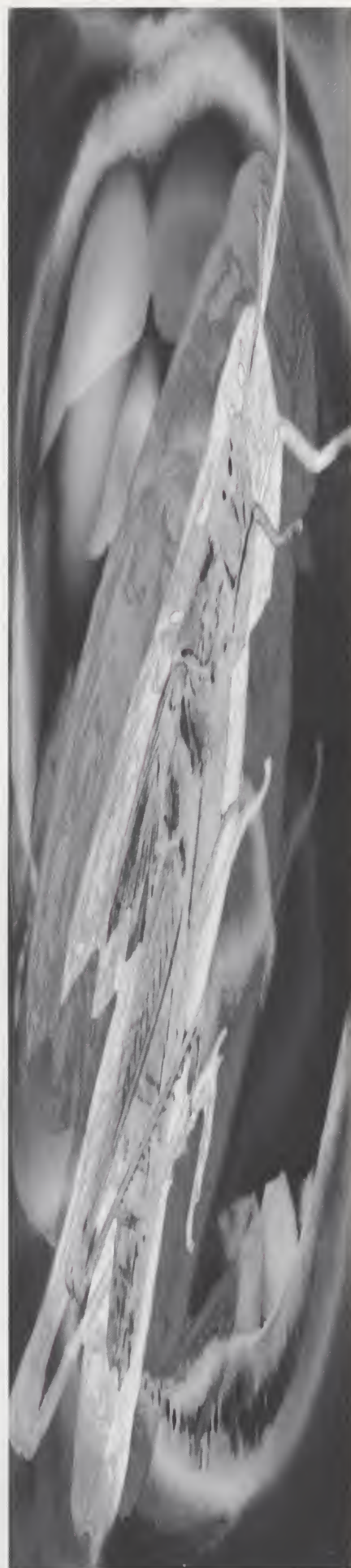
“I shall if you wish hold you, James. You may take what you will from what you see.”

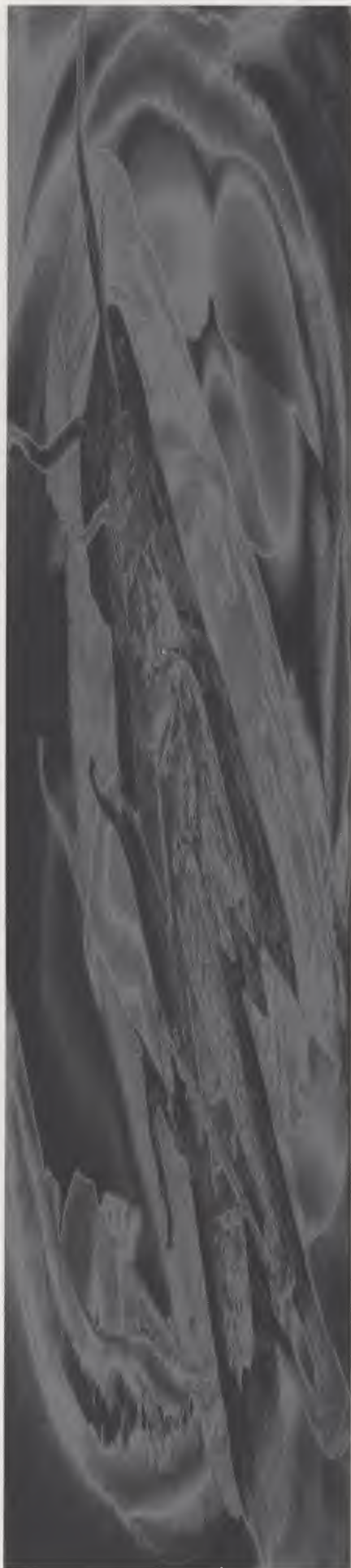
“I have never divined with flesh that is still alive,” I said softly, and in awe of what he was offering me.

“Then do so now.”

Whether he drew my head forward with his hands or I moved of my own volition is something I shall never know, but next my teeth had sunk into the soft flesh of his swollen breast. His strong hands supported my head, while his fingers sensually stroked my hair. I used my tongue to explore the texture of the tumour, sensing its preternatural heat, its tenacious grip on its host, the way it spread like an unfolding corolla. Soon I had found its heart, the pistil, where lay the passive organs of love and reproduction, and final decay and death.

As Tomas Bauer’s hands tightened on the back of my head I lunged forward, my jaw opened wide, my tongue guiding, my teeth easily piercing the thin





wasted skin that still managed somehow to contain the tumour. I bit into the heart of the cancer. Tomas gasped with pain or passion, and I, sublimely, felt myself release wetly and sweetly. With the access of intoxicating pleasure, came the clarity of perception of the little death: Tomas had brought me to this!

His talk of working alone, without me, had never been true! My rôle was to release him from death. The thrill of the realization urged me on to abandonment: I buried my face ever deeper into his chest as the ecstasy coursed through me. The blackness of the malignancy surged forward to take me, seeming to open up around my eyes like a long dark cylinder, rotating, drawing me through the all-enveloping abyss of night.

I, haruspex, had entered the darkest entrail of all.

Time went past. Minutes, hours, days, years; none held meaning any longer. I had moved to a plane where the mere counting of time was irrelevant. I knew only the gushing flood of death, pumping out around my face, a warm nectar, blinding me, drawing me down, drowning me.

I could no longer see. I was in terminal darkness and I was leaning on, resting on, a slope that was nearly vertical. It was warm and fleshly, coated in slime, lacking anywhere I could obtain a good hold. I felt the terror of what might lie below me and yearned to climb away from it.

A vertical undulation rippled down the slope, shifting me out and back over the abyss below. Panic flooded through me. I was starting to slide, so I held on, paralysed by the abject terror of what would happen to me if my grip weakened. My hands had become claws, their long tines sinking ineffectually into the slimy membrane to which I clung. Oblivion was below. I reached forward and up, trying to gain purchase on the greasy slope. One of my claws felt as if it had found a firmer place, and, thus encouraged, I shifted my weight below, my doubly articulated legs stretching and pushing.

I clicked. I moved.

Another peristaltic undulation came heaving down. This time I was dislodged! I fell, my limbs waving in terror, my unwieldy body curling instinctively into a defensive hump. Only by great good fortune did one of my claws make fleeting contact with the membranous wall. I slashed in the claws and held on with all my strength, and as my body thrashed and collapsed against the scummy gradient I heard others of my kind clicking and clattering with their fright as they too struggled to hold on.

Their panicky sounds swelled around me, muted by the slime around us, but echoing brightly off our chitinous carapaces. The being closest to me, clinging on not far above in the darkness, turned a grotesquely swollen head towards me. Its two rear legs were raised, their horrid inverted knees braced against each other. With a violent spasm the legs rubbed together, setting off a shrieking stridulation.

Around us, the other arthropods took up the rasping chorus, the endless braying sermon; I too felt my rear legs twitching unstoppably against each other. My father, my ancestors, my damned destiny!

By the time the next peristaltic convulsion rolled down towards us I was ready for it, and rode the attack without losing any more ground. The stridulations changed pitch as the slimy wall rippled against us. I shuffled my legs, croaking and belching with the effort, determined never again to fall.

Soon, I started to climb. Beside me, above me, below, the other damned beings climbed too. Ahead was a glimmer of light, a suggestion of final release from the pit, an invitation to life. I knew only the urge to escape and climbed grimly on.

With the next surge of peristalsis a torrent of vile fluids washed down from above, a raging flood of slime and acidic liquid. I held on, while others fell. A violent contraction shook the wall and a great eructation of gases roared past me, carrying with it a fine spray of much of the slime. Again, others around me were dislodged. In my mind I heard their dying fall as at last they entered the abyss.

I resumed my climb, following my father.

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST's *The Prestige* won both the World Fantasy Award and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction. His new novel, *The Extremes*, will be published by Touchstone in August. Following that will be the first English-language release of *The Dream Archipelago*, in 1999.

STORMY WEATHER

AN INTERVIEW WITH GRAHAM JOYCE

Three-time winner of the British Fantasy Award (for *Dark Sister*, *Requiem* and *The Tooth Fairy*), Graham Joyce has garnered a lot of respect in the genre since his first novel *Dreamside* was published in 1991. Not only has he received glowing praise from the likes of Ramsey Campbell and Michael Moorcock, but *The Tooth Fairy* was even nominated for the Booker Prize. His new novel, *The Stormwatcher*, is the first to be marketed as mainstream, an event which surprises the author. 'It's all happened by complete accident really,' he explains. 'When I went to Penguin it was because they were starting a horror list. Then they closed the horror list down but still wanted to continue to publish me. Penguin aren't publishing genre fiction anymore under genre labels; they're publishing genre fiction under their mainstream labels. Publishing events have happened around me rather than me having any influence over the way the books are published. Having said that, this is probably the least obvious genre novel I've done so far.'

The Stormwatcher chronicles several weeks in the lives of a group of friends as they holiday in The Dordogne in France. As the title suggests, the oncoming storm mirrors the internal conflicts within the group itself — in both cases, bad weather is imminent. Jessie, daughter of middle-class couple James and Sabine, is being corrupted by an unknown member of the group. On top of this, each of the friends has a varied past which, in combination, can be explosive. However, unlike many writers, Joyce is quite content to let his story unfold through the eyes of more than one character. 'I was actually breaking a rule in *The Stormwatcher* because generally one should, in a conventional narrative, follow the central protagonist. I've always done that, I like doing that, I understand why it must be done. But I also try to do something different each time rather than repeating the same novel. With *The Stormwatcher* I wanted to write an ensemble novel. I don't know whether that's a weakness — that it's difficult to locate a central character — but it's what I wanted to do. Because I was talking about the weather as a metaphor, I wanted to make the density of the relationships the issue so that one got the feeling that a group of people can make a "weather". Just like the meteorological conditions make a weather around them, they generate their own psychological weather.'

Meteorological metaphors abound in *The Stormwatcher*. Sabine, for instance, wishes her troubles and frustrations could be washed away by a rain storm, a theme which Joyce developed throughout the book. 'Because I was trying to say this thing about the weather — that people are subject to group-dynamic forces — I couldn't isolate one particular character. I was actually trying to relegate the significance of the individuals; trying to subordinate it to the group mind. That's why I was interested in doing an ensemble novel. I wanted this feeling that there was this nine miles high turbulence going on above the heads of the characters; that they were almost washing about on a kind of ocean somewhere. They had their unique qualities. But there was something much larger than themselves that was making them behave in different ways.'

Sexual conflict is a theme which runs through all of Joyce's books. He writes about real people whose affairs are fraught with suppressed passions, not to mention down-to-earth lust! Sex, in his books, seems tied into breaking rules; living dangerously. For example, there's an illicit affair between a teacher and a pupil in *Requiem*; adultery on a Greek island in *House of Lost Dreams*; a past affair between James and Rachel, two members of the group in *The Stormwatcher*. 'I had this idea that there's a relationship between vulnerability and the imagination,' says Joyce. 'So you have to expose your characters' vulnerabilities in social situations to explore the imaginative side of their characters; the extreme



PHOTOGRAPH BY JO PORTER

by Matt
Williams

dimensions of people's nature. I think that everybody's got extreme dimensions to their own nature, and those extremities are often manifested through either sexual repression or sexual maladjustment. Not every-body lives it, but I've got a feeling it's there. It just so hap-pens that in my books I *make* my characters live it. In real life people don't tend to push themselves to such extremes. But since those extremes are metaphors of what I'm trying to say I always make them jump through hoops in the books!

Another theme running through his writing is the ability to make the reader uncomfortable with his or herself; the psychological insights into our deepest, darkest, guiltiest secrets, are incisive and often embarrassingly illuminating. 'One of the weaknesses of the genre is that it puts people in extreme circumstances and then fails to actually ask the human questions about the way that we are frail. That's when our weaknesses of character actually emerge. A lot of genre material fails to serve the narrative by addressing those questions. But having put people in such difficult situations I'm more interested in how they're going to react and behave than in how the story's going to work out. I like to have those two things going on at the same time so that, hopefully, the novel is operating on two different dimensions. One in terms of which way the narrative is going to pay off, and the other in actually saying, "This is what we're like as human beings. This is how we live our lives; how sometimes we fail or serve each other"'

When writing a novel, Joyce is just as likely to let the characters dictate how the story will develop as plan it meticulously in advance. 'I always have a rough notion of how it's going to evolve. But I always see it as a kind of excavation too. Like with mining, you never actually sink a shaft unless you know there's some good coal there. But neither do you know what you're going to get out till you get down there and start digging. It might be of surprisingly good quality or it might be poor. I like to know roughly where I'm going with the thing; then I'll leave a good margin for development of different characters. Some become more interesting to me than others. I don't always know which way that's going to be, but that's only because I might have a pretty shrewd idea of where the narrative is going but haven't thought enough about how human beings might react in a given situation. So it always seems like there's room for one or more characters to behave in a way which is then interesting to analyse and explore.'

Several of Joyce's novels are set in exotic settings: the Dordogne in *The Stormwatcher*, Jerusalem in *Requiem*, a Greek island in *House of Lost Dreams*; warm climes of dust, heat and sweat. This allows the author to mirror internal conflicts in the characters, especially as tempers fray more rapidly in the continuous heat. 'I'm very interested in sense of place and this idea of landscape shaping the way that people behave. I've lived on a Greek island and I've lived in the Middle East. I respond very much to the weather and to the climate. I was always both impressed and appalled by the fact that in Greece a man could kill his wife and plead that the sirocco was blowing; that he could get off with a lesser sentence if he could convince the jury. I was always impressed by that because, having endured a sirocco myself for a few nights, I know it can drive you to absolute

distraction. I've always felt that I'm somebody who's rather sensitive to the weather and it affects my moods in a very strong way. Because Britain is such temperate place I find that I'm pitched into different moods when I'm in more exotic locations myself. Once, in a particularly hot climate, my wife emptied a bottle of water over me because I was behaving so badly. It was such a relief! I like my characters to be responding in a similar way.'

I read Joyce a passage from *The Stormwatcher*: "Words had a life of their own [...] were like currents of air, streaming hither and thither, trying to find an aggregate form. They were like weather fronts." One wonders whether this sums up the essence of the book. 'Yes, I think it does. I'm interested that you've pulled that out because I feel that people haven't got as much control over as they like to think over the things they say. Sometimes a person uses words to just express a mood rather their words being carefully thought out and delivered analytically. In the same way, I'm interested in what's *not* said. That's another thing I talk about in *The Stormwatcher* — words speak for the hidden side of people. Sometimes sciences do that just as eloquently. What I was interested in was the idea of words themselves acting like weather fronts.'

Jessie, the book's troubled youth, has her secret instructor, who, like the tooth fairy (in the novel of the same name), is there to plant adult concerns in the mind of a child. 'I've always been interested in the idea of people having shadow tuition, whether that be from a fantasy figure or a figure that turns out to be one of the people in the company. In some of the previous books, the shadow-tutor, if you like, has turned out, like in *The Tooth Fairy* or in *Requiem*, to be of supernatural origins. So I was interested in taking the same idea and actually leading the reader down that path of thinking that it would emerge as a supernatural character, but in the end they get a human figure. Also, I was interested in the idea of haunting the little girl, only with someone who was alive instead of dead. *The Stormwatcher* still has exactly the same Graham Joyce concerns running through it. It's just that this time the shadow tutor is not supernatural. But I hope that I kept tricking the reader into thinking that it might damn well prove to be supernatural at some point. It was a kind of literary game I was playing.'

The character of Rachel in *The Stormwatcher*, herself from a working-class background, makes an interesting comment about the class system when she says that she wants to take Jessie away from "[her parents'] banal taboos and shitty middle-class preoccupations". Given the author's working-class background (his father was a miner), might this be construed as a personal observation? 'I admit to being a very class-conscious person,' says Joyce. 'The subject can be boring to some people but not to me; the hierarchical arrangement of class in this country is endlessly fascinating. Its subdivisions are magnificent in the way that they operate, and I've always been into the nuances of social class, mainly because British people spend such a lot of time denying that it even exists. What I was doing in *The Stormwatcher* was deliberately trying to bring in a character who was from a working-class background. Who was trying to settle into a middle-class milieu and who felt unspoken hostility. The book isn't a whodunit but a who's-doing-it. I wanted to

play on the fact that Sabine, being a middle-class mother, would be making guesses about who's whispering to her daughter. Her natural instincts would make her think that the woman from the working-class background is responsible because she feels threatened by this person. So it was actually a way of me exploring some of those anxieties and insecurities from both sides of that social class divide.'

Joyce's previous jobs have included teaching and working as a European development officer for youth work. Understandably, he feels his background has influenced his portrayal of children in his stories. 'I don't think that adolescence has to be a time of crisis but it often is. When you look at the statistics for youth violence, the high levels of teenage suicide, you realise that a lot of people are, psychologically, quite up against it — trying to make this leap from childhood to adulthood. That period seems to have been artificially extended by this incredibly long period of adolescence that you now have to serve in modern western society. In a different society this would all be over and done with in some very quick rite of passage. One day you're a child and you go and, I don't know, jump off a 200-foot pylon with a vine creeper attached to your ankle and then you're a man! Now it seems that you change schools when you're eleven years old, and then you reach seventeen or eighteen and you *still* haven't proved to everybody's satisfaction that you're an adult.'

'I think there are huge consequences for the fact that we keep people in a suspended state of childhood. And these tend to be expressed in terms of anxieties for that person, who is physically an adult and should be doing adult things and accepted on adult terms, but is kept artificially in this state of childhood or adolescence. I mean, adolescence is an invention, a concept really — there was no such thing as "adolescence" before this century. So the psychological anxieties that accrue around this thing that we've done to prevent people growing up, I think, demands a form of payback. I saw a lot of this stuff when I was involved with youth work. That's why it works itself out in characters like Sam in *The Tooth Fairy*, or Jessie in *The Stormwatcher*.'

Horror novels in particular have long played on the notion that, since the personality of the youngster is unformed, he or she is much more easily swayed by the opinions of others. 'Because the youth hasn't assumed his role in society as an adult, he or she is so incredibly open to influence — good or bad — which is why a lot of adolescents pick on role models like pop stars, political and religious ideologies that they think will solve everything. There's almost a desperation to crystallise the nature of life. People are drawn to these crystallisations, and sometimes it makes them open to really bad influence. I've always been interested in that. For example, I had to do a lot of work on why young people were drawn to religious cults and political extremities, and I always felt that it was because this hole had been created and they were just dying for something strong to fill it.'

The next novel, already written, sees a return to exotic climes. 'It's going to be set in both Chicago and Rome. When I did *The Tooth Fairy*, that was where I grew up, in a Warwickshire colliery village. I figured I owed it to my locality to see if I could do a book without relying on exotic settings. So I've done that; I'm back on exotic settings now! Chicago's a really futuristic city for architecture; and Rome, of course, is located in the past. So you have this kind of past-future thing. Again I'm exploring this issue of bad influence. Also, the book will steer a little bit back towards the genre. I've always been writing the kind of books which interest me. I'm a fan of both genre material and mainstream books. I read both, and I think my own books reflect that. I'm quite happy to be in the position of asking questions about genre in each book. I always feel like I'm doing something right if somebody can't quite place the genre of one of my novels.'

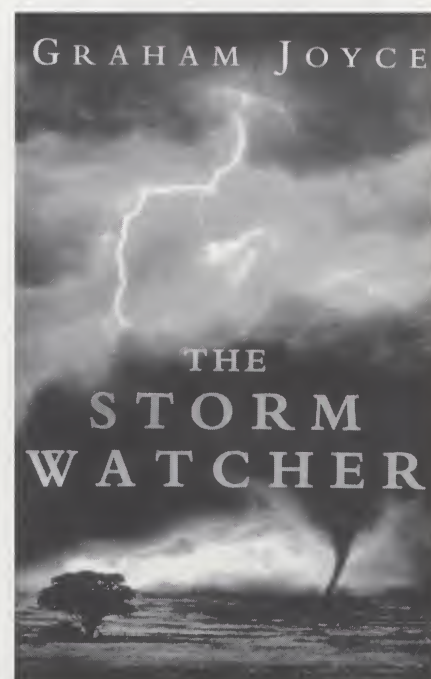
'I think I got shoehorned into genre publication. I was never unhappy with that because I was a fan of it myself. It's just that sometimes, when you start out as a writer, your book gets chosen by this or that editor because they've got a space on this or that list. If they like what you're doing and can shoehorn it into that list then they'll do so. And I figure that's what happened with mine and why there's always been a difficulty every time I've turned in a new book to a publisher.'

THE STORMWATCHER

Graham Joyce

Penguin paperback original, 280pp

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It is August in the Dordogne and the weather is oppressive — dense mist in the mornings and unrelenting sun in the afternoons. The rising mistral signals a change but, as yet, it is still a long way off.

A group of friends are sitting uneasily around the dinner table — James, his French wife Sabine and their two children, Jessie and Beth, have been joined by their friends Matt and Chrissie and their daughters' piano teacher, Rachel. It should be the beginning of a wonderful holiday but Jessie's behaviour is becoming increasingly disturbing. She talks to a face in the mirror and responds to whispered commands that only she can hear. Increasingly distressed, Sabine is determined to discover who in the group is responsible for poisoning her daughter's mind.

The air is awash with sexual and personal conflicts, secrets and lies. Within days, as the storm approaches, the web of deception around all their lives will be destroyed by a terrible tragedy, wrecking the carefully concealing facade.

The Stormwatcher is an extraordinary psychological novel exploring secret fears and fantasies that haunt us all.

'Deft, canny and highly readable'

Iain Banks

eye of the beholder

tamar yellin

THE LATEST ART-FORM, THEY SAY, IS THE INTERNAL organ. We live in paradoxical times. Artists expose their viscera to the public, yet if we brush a stranger in the swimming pool we are expected to apologise.

Last month I was called for my annual eye exam. It was the start of a disturbing experience for me.

There was nothing sinister in the summons. Some people, I am aware, never test their eyes from one year to the next. But I am severely short-sighted and I wear contact lenses. Check-ups are a necessary inconvenience. I have never bothered to investigate too closely the dire rumours regarding prolonged wear of contacts. Unpleasant terms like 'hardening' and 'sclerotic' and 'oxygen starvation' have sometimes winged past my ears, but I have always ducked them. I like my lenses far too much. I go for my annual check-ups and hope for the best, though I don't go for medicals of any other description: so far as the rest of my body is concerned I would rather not know. But eyes are irreplaceable. Blindness is more frightening than death.

Not long ago I joined an up-to-the-minute clinic. A fancy place with gold windows I passed in town. It had recently opened and had all the state-of-the-art equipment. I took up their special introductory offer. I had long been dissatisfied with my own optician, an elderly man who worked from a back room and had known me since I was a child. When I complained to him that I couldn't see, he seemed to think the problem was psychological rather than prescriptive. This place was staffed by elegant young women, and for two hundred pounds or so I could have the whole package: six-monthly replacement scheme, cut-price solutions, and a full yearly check-up using the latest technology.

By means of this, they assured me, they would not only be able to prescribe the best contact lenses for my needs, but could also keep tabs on the hardening-sclerotic-starvation thing and, by deep examination of my eyes, rule out certain lethal diseases which (if we but knew it) first make their presence known in there.

On first impression the Vision Clinic was not as revolutionary as I had hoped. It was clean, certainly, and full of chrome and carpet, and an easy-listening compilation played at low volume in the waiting lounge. A girl in an Alice band offered me refreshments. Then Ms Patinkin ushered me towards the dreaded chair. The chair was new, and upholstered in maroon leather, but with its complexity of gadgets, flaps and levers it was in essence no different from Mr Brill's or any other authoritarian chair.

I am not an artist. I work in an office block. I do not know if this reluctance to expose myself — any part of myself — to the scrutiny of strangers (however qualified) is a common feeling. But it is what has kept me from the

doctor's surgery for the past nine years. And even though eyes are a wholesome organ, nothing secret or shameful — anyone, after all, may look into our eyes — nevertheless I submitted myself reluctantly to the beautiful optician.

She smiled at me. She placed on my nose a pair of hideous frames, into which she flicked, by sleight of hand it seemed, a succession of little lenses. She said, "Are the symbols clearer on the red or the green?" and asked me to read out lines of blurry letters. Eventually I found myself sitting eyeball to eyeball with her, my chin in a sort of stirrup, looking up to the ceiling, over to the left, over to the right, blinking, while she swept my eye with a strobe, so that I could see a whole rootwork of red veins across my cornea I never realised I possessed.

All this however was preliminary. Mr Brill, in his less sensuous manner, might have done as much. I was now invited to enter the inner sanctum: a darkened room with mirrored panels in its ceiling and a fearsome technological array. The door closed and a figure in a white coat led me to a swivel stool.

"Just make yourself comfortable," the technician said. I was curious, I admit. I placed my chin in the stirrup, my forehead against the Frankensteinian bar. What did I see? Lo and behold, a blue yacht floating in an infinite ocean, now blurred, now clear: an almost beautiful experience. I would have asked its purpose, except that the technician must have taken this wondrous yacht of modern science so much for granted that to ask her anything at all, I felt, would be an irrelevance.

So we proceeded to the next piece of apparatus and in a voice devoid of expression she assured me that it would not hurt. Saying this, she adjusted the piece so close to my very eyeball that I felt it brush against my lashes. Still I didn't withdraw and in a moment a puff of air hit my cornea, one, two, three, making me jump and, involuntarily, laugh.

She did not smile; she repeated the procedure for the other eye and when I jerked back three times more seemed bored, as though I had proved myself no different from the rest of the human race. And this was no laughing matter; though when she did sit me down in front of the final instrument and said, without flinching, "Now I am going to scan the back of your eye," something happened which threw her whole demeanour effectively out of kilter.

It was a black cyclops with a single lens. She placed her eye to one side and I to the other. I was continuing my meditation on power and submission when — *snap!* — the back of my eye had been photographed, and all that remained was a disc of white light where my sight once was.

"My God," I heard the technician say.

She applied the cyclops to my other eye. This did not interest her, and she impatiently turned it back. She gazed for a long time, rather as an astronomer must when he has spotted a new star.

"My God," I heard her whisper once again.

"Just a moment please," she said, and got up and went out, leaving me in a state of mind one might well imagine.

She returned with Ms Patinkin and someone else in tow. Ms Patinkin sat down at the cyclops and took a look. She was a cool customer, she kept her professional manner. Nevertheless I could tell she was affected. Then the other optician had a squint. He said, "Wow." Then they all went off in a huddle and discussed me.

What had they seen? I longed — and was afraid — to know. A more assertive person might have demanded answers. I however waited patiently until they chose to tell.

Ms Patinkin returned and smiled at me. I was comforted by the presence of Ms Patinkin. If she told me everything was normal I would quite happily believe her. Ms Patinkin said, "There's nothing to worry about. But we'd like you to come back for some further tests."

I asked if there was something wrong with me. Ms Patinkin repeated, "It's nothing to worry about. You can continue to wear your lenses as usual."

So I made another appointment with the girl in the Alice band. Then I went off home to worry.

WHEN I GOT IN IVAN WAS WATCHING THE SIX o'clock news. A dozen dead bodies were strewn around a burnt-out church.

"Barbarians," Ivan said, shaking his head.

"If you were there you'd be the same."

"If I were there I'd be behind a camera."

Wearily I unpacked the few items of shopping I had brought. I said, "Do you want rice or potatoes with your chicken?" I wondered whether to tell Ivan about my eye.

Ivan has twenty-twenty vision. He takes his eyes for granted. He takes everything for granted. Nothing has ever gone wrong for him. His indestructible optimism, while sometimes annoying, anchors my desperate life.

"And they told you nothing," he repeated, gravely, when I had spilled the beans. "But why didn't you just ask?"

I had not asked because I knew the answer: it was my own death they had seen there at the bottom of my eye.

"Rubbish!" Ivan exploded. "Which eye was it?"

"The right."

"Turn your face to the light."

I did so obediently. I tipped my head back and he examined my eye.

"Well?"

"It's blue." He smiled at me. "I wouldn't worry about it."

But I could not help worrying, and before long I had conjured a sharp pain like a needle piercing the back of my eye. Ivan sent me to bed with a cold compress. And behind the double darkness of the compress I painted visions of the anomaly haunting me: a parasitic amoeba, a disgusting clot, a tiny fatal tumour fed by straining vessels.

I crawled out of bed and into the dazzle of the living room, where Ivan was watching the late night film. A tangle of naked bodies rolled across the screen.

"I daren't close my eyes," I moaned. "I see things."

He pulled me onto the sofa and embraced me. His own eyes were tired, his face pale. He should have been in bed, he had an early shoot tomorrow. "Watch some telly," he said. "That'll take your mind off it." So we curled up and watched the film together.

BY THE TIME OF MY NEXT VISIT TO THE VISION

Clinic I was ready to face the worst. I strode through town with an air of dignified sadness, sensed rather than saw the young derelict seated in the shadow of its gold windows and ran upstairs, afraid of delaying the dreaded hour, but my watch was fast. When the door finally opened a man in a white coat bedecked with instruments spoke my name, and ushered me into a room I had not seen before.

It was dark except for a central pool of light, and bare except for a single instrument: a mammoth cyclops, twice the size at least of the one I had previously encountered, and more advanced; a terrifying object, but also beautiful. The man must have sensed my hesitation, for he pushed me slightly in the small of the back and encouraged me, in the most friendly manner, to take up my position on the subject side.

I placed my chin on the stirrup and applied my right eye to the scope, and he sat down opposite and fixed his bushy eyebrow to the viewer, and we remained like this, in silence, for some considerable time.

In due course he sat back with a loud sigh of satisfaction, and I heard him crack his knuckles. Looking up I noticed he was smiling. But he immediately said, "If you don't mind," and we took up our positions as before. At last he straightened, rubbed his neck and murmured, "Remarkable." As if on cue another white-coated figure stepped out of the shadows.

In the bright light of the cyclops my eyes had not adjusted to the surrounding darkness. Now however I became aware of not just one but several spectators standing in the room. Indeed, if my senses didn't deceive me, we were seated in the centre of a ring of observers whose presence I had not suspected when we first entered.

The chief optician gave up his seat to his colleague with some reluctance. She in turn sat down and adjusted the scope with an avidity I couldn't fail to notice. She gazed. What was this disease, so unique and beautiful they actually took pleasure in its contemplation? Was such detachment possible in the face of a person's impending blindness or death? As one spectator after another took their turn before the cyclops — some acknowledging me with a sheepish smile — I grew increasingly resentful, feeling myself and my suffering reduced to nothing more than an alluring spectacle.

Only after the twelfth or thirteenth did I sit back and protest, quite meekly, that my neck was hurting. The disappointment in the room was audible.

"Yes, yes, that is quite enough for now," the master of ceremonies said, and flicking on a phalanx of switches he flooded the room with light. Apart from ourselves it was empty.

"Do you think you know what is the matter with me?" I asked.

He was writing on a clipboard; he did not seem to be concerned with me just then. At last however he clicked his pen and thrust it into his pocket. "It's nothing whatever to worry about," he said. "Miss Patinkin will have told you; you can go on wearing your lenses."

"Ms Patinkin hasn't told me anything at all," I insisted. "Is it something serious? I really feel I ought to be informed."

I noticed now that he was avoiding my eyes, but he repeated, "I'm certain the condition isn't dangerous."

Not dangerous! My limbs were flooded with a cold dread. I demanded to know the name of my condition. The chief optician looked inexplicably amused.

"I don't know. We'll have to think of one! How about 'Personal-Retinal Transparency'. PRT?"

I chewed this over.

"No," he continued, "we'll have to think up something much sexier than that."

He went on fiddling with his clipboard, got out his pen and made a few more notes. I tried to take in the implications of his words. My heart was beating in a harsh erratic manner. "What exactly," I said, "do you see when you look at me through that thing?"

"I can't put it into words."

For answer I placed my chin once more in the stirrup.

He hesitated, then succumbed. He couldn't help himself. Off went the lights. We were locked in transference again. "Well?"

"I can't. It's..." His voice was taut with suppressed excitement. "It's indescribable."

"Describe it."

Silence. Then: "It's beautiful. Terrifying." He pulled back almost in desperation. "There aren't any words for it because it isn't like anything I've ever seen before. And yet there isn't a doubt in my mind of what it is. You know what they say — the eye is the window to the soul? In your case that seems to be quite literally true."

I sat back also, my heart pounding, feeling — what? Fear, panic, anger, wonder? I trembled with cold. Yes, I felt violated, and instinctively I clutched myself in my own arms. But there was this too: exhilaration.

But the man was speaking. He was pleading with me. "You will come back, won't you?" he was saying. "There are others who would like to see it. So many others. It's an absolutely remarkable phenomenon."

I DID NOT SAY MUCH WHEN I GOT HOME THAT EVENING. I let Ivan think I was sickening for a cold. He showed me some shocking pictures he had taken and I let them pass in front of me one by one. After a while I said, "Do you remember that puppy we had once? It had such beautiful eyes, and sometimes I used to stare into them and it would stare back at me and it seemed as if it knew everything."

Ivan, carefully gathering up his pictures, said, "Yes. I've seen that in young children sometimes."

I turned and looked into Ivan's eyes. They were brown. "And yet, supposedly, they know the least of all."

Ivan smiled his lopsided smile. "Well, perhaps they don't. Perhaps we forget little by little as we grow up."

"The place we came from," I completed, but neither of us knew quite what we meant. Later in the darkness of

the bedroom I was still thinking — the pain in my right eye never left me — and it seemed quite clear for a moment how things stood; how my eye had become a window to my 'I', and open to a desired and devastating violation.

"Deeper than sex," I said aloud, and Ivan, whom I had thought asleep, turned slowly on his pillow.

"The only thing deeper than sex," he murmured sleepily, "is sex." But no, I thought, there is a deeper violation, and even as I wanted it I knew it would destroy me. Hadn't the chief optician called me beautiful? And terrible? My vanity wanted that. It wanted all the eyes of the world to see my inner beauty. Yet there are some things, surely, which were never intended to be seen by others.

WHY DID I KEEP ON RETURNING TO THE VISION

Clinic? Some strange compulsion apparently took me there, made me sit for hours at a time before the cyclops, kept me immobile while the endless stream of observers looked their fill.

Would anyone else have acted differently? I loved to hear their gasps of amazement, their murmurs of horror or delight; I longed to glimpse the expression on their faces as they moved away. Rapture, shock and revelation: they had seen my essence, and I needed to catch the reflection of it in their eyes.

Sometimes I felt like a madam receiving clients. The girl with the Alice band deferentially brought me coffee; the chief optician crushed ten pound notes into my hand. I wouldn't take them. I was compelled; a victim. I walked home feeling ravaged, angry, sickened.

Ivan once suggested he come with me. He was suspicious. He wanted to know what was really going on. The notion appalled me. It was as though I should invite him to watch me having sex with strangers.

Was it my imagination, or did my clients leave increasingly with grimaces of horror on their faces? Was the fascination with which they gazed more poisonous than before? For now I offered them not my beauty but my vanity; the rapture they took away with them was born of bloodlust, envy, all the darker passions. And then, one day: "Yes, apparently it is true," the chief optician said. "The anomaly is coming closer to the surface."

For when I had gone to Mr Brill the day before, desperate for reassurance, even his primitive instrument had picked up inklings of the phenomenon.

He had raised an eyebrow when I appeared in his shabby surgery. I told him my story and he shrugged his shoulders. He seemed to consider I deserved my fate.

"What you must remember," he intoned in his fragile, foreign voice, "is that these places want your money first and foremost. What seems to be a problem here," he pointed to his eyes, "is more often than not a problem here." He tapped his forehead, but he agreed to perform a cursory examination of my eyes. When he quickly fell into a catatonic stare I realised what he was seeing, and filled with nausea, fled from his battered chair.

I had no wish for Mr Brill to see into my soul.

"Yes, it is becoming clearer," the optician said. "It's my estimate that in a week or so it will become visible to the naked eye."

Ms Patinkin, standing aside, gave me a sympathetic look. I think she was the only one who realised I was prostrate with anguish. Others seemed to emanate a sort of jealousy, as if they wished they, too, could reveal their all.

I went out that afternoon and bought a pirate patch. Ivan said, when he saw me, "Stylish. I suppose you don't want me to see it either."

I shook my head. Standing before the bathroom mirror I gazed into my own eyes, which showed no sign except a slight discoloration. I remembered certain myths: Narcissus frozen by his own reflection; Medusa who turned all who met her gaze to stone. Either way the precedents were hardly cheerful. I wondered what would happen to me when I finally saw myself.

"WE COULD PROJECT IT," MS PATINKIN SAID.

"I strongly advise against that," said the chief optician.

"Why?" I wanted to know.

"There would be a distortion," the chief optician said.

"Not really," Ms Patinkin answered.

I sat between them, incapacitated by the pumped-up chair, my head pinned behind enormous binoculars through which I could see nothing. I heard only their disembodied voices, arguing with cool anger the rights and wrongs of my viewing the contents of my own eye.

"I cannot be held responsible for the consequences," said the chief optician.

"I'll take responsibility." Ms Patinkin rigged up a screen and dimmed the room. She fitted something cumbersome across my eye.

"I think I should warn you," the chief optician said. But Ms Patinkin switched on the apparatus.

"Now keep your head very still."

I kept my eyes closed. I could hear the humming of the apparatus. Also the beating of my own heart. Excitement, terror. There was no need for me to open my eyes. I could still say to Ms Patinkin, "Switch off the apparatus." I did not have to look.

What was there, after all, to be afraid of? Did I not fundamentally know myself? And what, in that case, was there to be surprised by? My soul was nothing special, nothing rare. It was one of the billions enfleshed, trapped now in a sticky teardrop, exceptional only in its untimely appearance. Soon no doubt there would be others like it, discovered in clinics the world over, photographed, catalogued, ogled as the latest, craziest art. And as I thought this I felt my soul contract, freeze, shiver, shrink into itself. And as I thought this I tore open my reluctant eyes.

I looked at last. No words can describe my disappointment.

THAT NIGHT, IN THE PRIVACY OF OUR FLAT, I BECAME hysterical. Ivan had to restrain me from injuring myself.

I smashed the mirror. I seized the kitchen knife. Running through my head like an incantation were the words 'If thy right eye offend thee, Pluck it out!'

Ivan had just succeeded in bringing me to some measure of calm when the doorbell rang. It was Ms Patinkin, more elegant than ever in a camel coat. She carried a brown envelope under her arm.

She held it out to me where I lay on the sofa. "I thought you should have this," she murmured. "It's your scan."

I opened it and looked. It was beautiful. And unforgivable.

Ms Patinkin gazed at me with infinite sympathy: her eyes were grey. She said, "I am so very sorry." Then, without another word, she left the flat.

Ivan closed the door behind her. I held the envelope towards him. "Do you want to look?" I said. But he remained where he was, exhausted, leaning against the door. He shook his head.

"I don't want to look at photographs," he said, "I want to look at you." And he came across and sat down very close to me. He put a hand towards my face, and instinctively I placed mine over the pirate patch. "What are you afraid of?" he said, and very gently pulled my hand away. "Don't I know you better than anyone?" Ivan insisted, and gently, very gently, he peeled back the patch and looked into my tearful eyes.

For a long time we gazed at each other in silence, in apprehension, in tenderness. For a long time Ivan fixed me with his steady gaze. It was like that first moment, the long delicious moment, when we had mutually agreed on love.

"What can you see?" I asked.

Just as on that other occasion, Ivan lapsed into a twisted smile. He shrugged his shoulders.

"What do you think?" he answered. "They're blue."

TAMAR YELLIN's stories have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies including *London Magazine*, *Staple*, *Best Short Stories* and *The Slow Mirror: New Fiction by Jewish Writers*, and also broadcast on BBC Radio 4. She lives in Yorkshire and works in Interfaith Education.

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rick cadger's unquiet soul

A few weeks back, my computer died. It had served me for a good few years, but the high mileage extracted a terrible price from the poor thing and, in the end, a combination of careless handling and sheer old age resulted in its demise. Thank Christ.

Harsh and ungrateful? No, I don't think so; not when I think of the torture the thing put me through. I used to tell people that my PC had a little trap door on the back where you shovelled the coal in, but they all thought I was joking. Those of you who have any experience of desk-top publishing or other applications which make fairly high demands of a computer's capabilities may be able to imagine what it was like trying to produce a magazine on an XT class PC. Those of you who are unfamiliar with the technology and thus unable to conjure the mental picture in question may count yourselves extremely lucky. It is not a pretty sight.

Anyway, this edition of *Soul* is the first to be typed on my new Pentium machine with its copious helpings of RAM, terrifyingly huge hard drive (the old one was 40 MB!), SVGA graphics and legions of bloody hi-tech distractions. If you are reading this then willpower will have prevailed over the lure of the Internet, bundled games software, magazine cover-disks full of amusing, but ultimately useless, gimmicky programs that create factual screen-savers (for the uninitiated, a factual screen-saver is a small mammal about the size of a hamster which is considered a great delicacy in Luton) and the like. If you are not reading this then I was unable to resist, missed my deadline and am out of a job.

Distractions must surely be the writer's greatest enemy. Most of us have day jobs which finance this non-profit brother/sisterhood to which we belong, therefore we have a limited amount of time to spend tapping away at the keyboard. Anything which diverts us from this, be it family, friends, beer, television, reading or computers is a pimple upon the bottom of our progress in our chosen craft.

The evolution of computing, particularly the growth of the Internet, has changed the face of communication immensely in a remarkably short time. We are able to exchange information quickly and conveniently without even the need to commit

it to paper. The so-called paperless office is fast becoming a paperless world. The growth of multimedia — the combined use of sound, pictures, video etc — has accelerated and compounded the changes. Speech-recognition is slowly replacing the keying in of text, and the hardware is starting to answer back as well.

I can't help wondering how soon it will come to pass that text is seen as an archaic medium suitable only for the direction-signs in museum lobbies. Information will still be exchanged and disseminated; stories will still be published and scripts will still be produced, but will the writer (one who writes), inputting his material via microphone, have become the ... dictator (one who dictates — a role which some might claim is currently filled by the editor)? I hope not. There is something both reassuring and stimulating about the scratch of biro on paper, or the click of finger on keyboard.

Don't get me wrong. I'm no tech-fearing luddite. On the contrary, I worship those heroes whose combined labours resulted in the development of the word-processor. Bigger fire, the wheel or sliced bread; the word-processor is man's most excellent invention. Without it, weak willed people like me would shy away from the soul-destroying task of retyping improved drafts, and the result would be a far cry from the finely honed product you are now enjoying (stand up the boy who made that remark).

However, everything has a downside... The all-singing, all-boogying software of today has turned out to be a regular Typhoid Mary of hideous diseases. Thesauritis — an acute inflammation of the desire to replace words with exotic and obscure synonyms — is perhaps the commonest. There are others: fontitis manifests itself as a tendency to cram dozens of decorative typefaces into a single document. Where gadgets and gimmicks exist, so does the temptation to use them, and there's the rub. Grammar checkers are useful, but must not be allowed to rule with a rod of iron, or they sterilise prose to the point of lifelessness. Just because your new word-processor allows you to insert 'amusing' clip art images into your letters doesn't mean you have to fill every last remaining centimetre of white space with them.

It is not just the nuts and bolts, functional aspects of communication that have been transformed either. Control of information is no longer the domain of governments and media corporations. The birth of the Net has meant that anyone with the equipment and a bit of patience can gain access to vast resources on any conceivable subject. Censorship is fast becoming an obsolete science, its relevance swept away by a deluge of uncontrollable free information. It is no longer possible for self-appointed guardians of good taste and morality to force us to wear rose-tinted shades...the whole world lies spread before us, warts and all, open to scrutiny. Far from being a step towards an unstoppable and disastrous slide into decadence, the communication revolution may yet herald an era of fresh honesty, openness and free debate. What choice will there be, when any and every event can become worldwide common knowledge within moments of its occurrence?

As a writer and a parent, my attitude to censorship has been somewhat ambiguous. In the role of writer, I have scoured all the media — especially those hardest for our authorities to regulate, namely satellite television and the Internet — for the eccentric, the outrageous, the obscene, the inspirational. There have been times when I wished I hadn't found such sudden, shocking images: things that I was quite unprepared for. On some occasions, the parent-reflex almost had me reaching for the phone, or for letter-writing paraphernalia ('Disgusted' of Bedfordshire). But, happily, after the initial shock wore off, I have been able to look at each example in a calmer light, and I realise that *none* of this information, for that is what words and pictures are, is ultimately harmful in itself. Information is not dangerous, but ignorance can be catastrophic. If material of a certain kind is forced underground, then it will attain a new potency, as has historically been the case. If the same material is examined openly, then it will either be shown to be less sinister than suspected, or if it is indeed odious it seems likely that familiarity will breed the contempt it deserves: its power to shock and corrupt will become dissipated. Either way, a certain neutralising effect takes place.

Yes indeed, this new-fangled technology stuff could be a very good thing.





wayne edwards's overdose

The Academy Awards recently came and went here in the States. As usual, I disagree with the outcome, but hell, everyone has his opinion. *Titanic* was a pretty good movie, but the *best* movie of 1997? Not by a long shot. For one thing, the script sucked. Loaded with cheesy dialogue and idiotic jokes about Picasso being a hack, *Titanic*'s writers (including Big Jimbo himself) must have been coming off an unsightly tequila bender when they put pen to paper. What about acting performances? Nothing outstanding there. In fact, the only justice in nominations came when King Leo didn't get one for 'Best Actor'. Kate Winslet? Who? Was she in the movie? Completely forgettable. None of the actors in Hollywood's biggest movie of 1997 grabbed an Oscar. I don't know how it happened, but I'm glad it did.

Even though *Titanic*'s actors did not fare well, the movie got fourteen nominations and won eleven awards. Woof. Some of them were deserved, whatever that means. And maybe 'deserve' is the wrong question to ask anyway. Forget individual opinions about who did what 'best', we ought to be wondering instead why there are Academy Awards in the first place. Or Golden Globes. Or Fill-In-The-Blank awards. What do they mean? Why does anybody care?

A lot of people *do* care. It has been reported that 87 million people in 120 countries watched the Oscars broadcast this year. That's a big nut. Obviously, then, there is money to be made here, for the studios, the actors, the networks broadcasting the awards, and just about everybody connected with the movies. Money money money. It's not hard to understand that. It has already been established in this column (and countless other places) that cashola is the prime motivating factor in human endeavor. The only reason a profit potential exists, however, is because movie-goers apparently think the Oscars signify a measure of quality. Jack Nicholson won an Oscar. Oh! Jack has a new movie out. I better go see it because he must be good. James Cameron is an Oscar-winning director. His next movie is therefore #1 on my list. Russell Carpenter got the nod for cinematography, so I better see his next flick. Well, maybe not that one, but you get the idea. Do people really think this way? Yes, a lot of them do. And even if they don't *in fact*, they *act* like they do. That

gives studios and producers enough predictive power to go on, enough incentive to offer the big Oscar-winning stars \$20,000,000 + for their next project because it is a near certainty that next project will generate a big pile of money.

Despite the apparent idiocy of associating, without question, quality with award, I think people are rational, in the main. They believe that when an actor or a writer or what have you is given an award it represents the culmination of a careful process of selection whereby inferior candidates are weeded out in favor of those who excel in grace, character, and passion. This belief is probably wrong, but the error is a matter of ignorance, not stupidity. In other words, it is an information problem. Eventually people *will* catch on. If the Oscars were a complete wash every year in every category, people would cease to put any stock in them at all. So, there are some certainties (*Titanic* will win lots of awards), some surprises, good or bad (good: *The Full Monty* wins; bad: *Titanic* goes 11 for 14), and maybe a genuine outrage (*Contact* missing out in the sound categories). It is a formula that keeps people coming back.

And still, the nagging question, why awards? Why do we want them, and why do we put stock in other peoples' opinions?

The quick answer is laziness. It is just so much easier to let someone else sort out the 'good' from the 'bad'. In fact, rather than merely sorting, why not let them *decide* what is good and bad, then tell us and let us merely adopt their opinions? Yeah. Talk about a time-saver. Woo-hoo.

Another angle is we might think we should let the experts pick the best out because they have knowledge we are not privy to. They know more about the subject than we do. I mean, do you want a plumber to represent you in court? No, you want a lawyer. Therefore, shouldn't the industry people pick out the best movies (Academy Awards), the best books (Pulitzers, Pushcarts, etc), horror novels (Bram Stoker Awards), fantasy and sf (World Fantasy Awards, British Fantasy Awards, etc), and so on? Hmm. Maybe. But most people don't realize how a lot of these awards are handed out. They don't know that, in some cases, only a few dozen people actually vote on the awards in the end and that rather than voting for the 'best' work, the vote often goes to

friends instead, or for works they have not even seen/read/heard. These awards, folks, are a crock of shit, signifying nothing more than what can be accomplished by a clever marketing campaign. Experts? Oh, that's very often a stretch. A large number of these industry people (and yes, I am one of them) are the farthest thing from informed voters. If you are a professional writer trying to squeak out a living on a word rate, you really don't have time to investigate what *other* people are writing (unless you are a book reviewer by trade and not hobby). Publishers? Same thing – they are only worried about their own books, and most of the people at the top of the big houses don't read anything, *including* their own books. Editors? Same. Is it any different in the film industry? You should be able to answer that one on your own with little effort.

Anything else? Sure, lots of stuff but, as usual, I am beginning to ramble. I'll just close with the thought that it makes us feel good to win. Even if you are just a fan, when a movie you really like wins an award, you feel a little like you've won as well. You also share the grief when your pick doesn't make the cut. It's easy to imagine the pain is greater the closer you are, personally, to the statuette you didn't win.

Until recently, I was in residence at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. The (American) football team there always seems to win these days. National Champs. It doesn't matter that until last year UNL was simply the best team in the weakest conference in the country. They still won, right? And hey, we all like to win.

Last night I watched a taped boxing match between Naseem Hamed and the latest has-been he trounced in Manchester. After the fight, Hamed said, "I deserve everything I get, and double, and more." What an asshole. He thinks that he deserves all he desires because he pounded a weaker opponent. He sounds arrogant but we can relate, right, because hey, we all like to win.

Whenever someone wins, someone else has to lose. Fairness does not often enter into the equation. Maybe it's a sickness, or maybe it's just a way of life. In any case, we learn the lesson early on and hear it for the rest of our lives. Somewhere along the line we start to sing the song ourselves, and the ugly truth fades to the black justice that is the American Way.



Paul Finch

AT THE DOOR

IN 1997 I WAS THIRTY-EIGHT AND KATHY THIRTY-three. We'd been together nine years and the future looked good. In the June of that year we went down to the West Country, where two former-student friends of ours were getting hitched, and it was a load of fun. That night, in our hotel bedroom, I finally broached a subject which up until then had been totally taboo between us.

I turned over in bed and looked at Kathy. She was reading an Anne McCaffrey novel, but glanced up.

"Is there any reason why we shouldn't get married?" I asked.

A quizzical look appeared on her face. "Why?"

"Well," I said. "Isn't it the thing to do? I mean, I love you...I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

I wouldn't normally have been so forthcoming, even to Kathy, but I'd been drinking at the reception. I wasn't drunk, however.

She mused for a moment. "Is there any need?"

"There's no need, but...well, it just seems the thing to do."

"Bit of a lame argument."

I shrugged and lay back on the pillow. "It doesn't really matter, I suppose."

She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "You old romantic. We'll think about it. How's that?"

I sensed that she wasn't serious. I don't know why. One of Kathy's most enchanting assets was her bluntness. She was honest rather than rude, but she always spoke her mind. Not on this occasion. For the first time ever, I felt that she was leading me on.

And that was the point in my life, I think, when things went so horrendously askew.

I used to think I knew who I was. The events of my existence are still fairly clear in my memory: the anonymous beginnings in a nowhere-place; the subsequent waste and want and total lack of direction; the many about-turns; then the danger; the killing; the brain-damage; and Kathy — so beautiful, so smart, so much better than me, I thought; the hopes and dreams; then the ruin of those hopes and dreams; and finally now...the madness, the terror, the appalling horror of my current predicament.

I left school in 1975, closing a period of personal history remarkable only for the amount of time I spent daydreaming, and for the stunning lack of qualifications I'd achieved at the end. Half my O-level examinations I didn't even turn in for; the rest, I doodled through or left early. My Mum and Dad weren't too impressed. She'd once been a teacher, but packed in because her nerves were shot to ribbons; he was a bank employee, and had spent his entire career pushing paper for long hours, taking home a mediocre salary and watching an endless succession of buttock-kissing non-events ascend past him. Little wonder that by then he was a pudgy, sour-faced man, who spent most of his evenings in front of the telly and rarely spoke a word.

True to form, their protestations at my lack of ambition dwindled away after a few months, and I was allowed to drift into the sort of dead-end jobs the mid '70s would offer to anyone, chiefly because they were attractive to no one. I loaded shelves in supermarkets, taking home wages

so small they fitted into a five-by-five envelope; chopped trees on a farm, because I was a cheaper investment than a chain-saw; packed boxes in a mail-order firm — I got fired from that one because there was so little work that I'd sit for hours reading the paper, and one day overdid it and let the conveyor-belt stack up.

By 1977 I was starting to reconsider things. I was eighteen and old enough to realise that I needed at least the promise of a future, if not a future itself. The main trouble was the rut of a town I lived in. It was northern, provincial and so insignificant I won't even bother to name it. A history based on coal and cotton was now just that — history — and bleak days had arrived. Much town-centre property was derelict, most of the shops boarded up and vandalised, and the vast majority of the 'working-man' population left to play dominoes all day in the Labour clubs.

I had to get out, but where to? London was one consideration, though I knew plenty of people who'd made that mistake. Without two pennies to rub together, I'd likely end up in Cardboard City, maybe hooking in the subways in order to get food. I wasn't stupid enough to risk that. I was stupid enough, however, to believe an Army recruitment poster I saw in the Employment Services Centre. I didn't buy all that crap about 'joining the professionals' and 'leading a life of adventure', but I did suddenly realise that there might be a niche for me after all. And why not? Up until my father's generation, virtually every bloke in our family had done his time in the Forces. Even Dad had served with the RAF for his National Service.

So I put my ticket in. Straight away I was surprised by my range of options, but at the end of the day I didn't fancy being an engineer, or a signaller, or even an ordinary squaddie.

So I applied to the Parachute Regiment.

THE MONDAY AFTER OUR FRIENDS' WEDDING, I found myself alone in the office of the Christian periodical where I worked. I was musing over an article, rattling a pen between my teeth and gazing over the top of my VDU at the far wall, when I suddenly realised there was a door there which I hadn't seen before. It took me a second to realise this, and when I did, I stood up, bewildered.

Seconds passed, and my disbelief grew. I had never seen this door before. In fact, I was barely seeing it now, it blended in so well with the surrounding structure, even down to the texture of the wallpaper. The gaps around it were infinitesimal. I reckon it was only owing to a certain angle of light, and probably the intense concentration I'd shown, focusing on that point in particular, that the thing had appeared at all. Rather like those tricky 'magic-eye' pictures.

I walked across the room and pressed the door with my fingertips. I didn't expect anything to happen — okay, I hadn't noticed it before, but that didn't mean there was anything weird going on. Some time in the past Management had probably papered over an old fire-escape or something. It wouldn't budge, which seemed to prove my suspicion, so I turned to go back to my desk and tapped on the thing, twice, just for good measure.

And with a sudden 'click', and a pneumatic 'hiss', it opened. I backed away for a moment, unnerved, wondering

if I'd done some damage. A moment or two later, I opened it fully and poked my nose through...into a long, darkened corridor, which seemed to run the length of our office and well beyond. After a moment's consideration, I stepped into it.

Low-key lighting, the source of which I couldn't detect, revealed several odd things immediately. To one side of the corridor, the wall was stone — solidly-mortared bricks in fact — but the other, the one connecting with the office, was wood. And flimsy wood at that. In fact, from where I was, it looked distinctly like stage-scenery. Here and there, multi-digit numbers were scrawled on it in chalk. Natural seams, which had been strengthened with duct-tape and metal bolts, divided it into large sections, and props held it in place. Below my feet there were wooden boards, very oily and dusty, with cables snaking back and forth along them. Quite close to where I was standing, a large frame with a cluster of disconnected arc-lights — the sort of things you see on TV sets — was leaning to one side. An open box beside it contained variously coloured filaments.

I turned slowly and looked at the back of the door I'd just come through. It was painted matt-black, and emblazoned on it in strong white lettering was the legend 'Stage 48'.

Too perplexed to think straight, I began to walk along the corridor. I walked for several minutes. Here and there I'd pass other doors — 'Stage 21', 'Stage 39', 'Stage 56' — but little else, even when I turned corners and set off down branch-tunnels. Once or twice I went up and down iron stairs to different levels, but always there was more wood and canvas, more stage-doors.

I realised that by now I'd walked not only well beyond the boundaries of our office, but probably beyond the building itself. As our company was located on the third floor, overlooking to one side New Quay Street and to the other, the River Irwell, that was impossible. The labyrinth went on however. Occasionally I'd hear distant voices, as if people at work were calling to each other; sometimes there'd be the bang or crash of a heavy object being humped along.

At last I decided to try one of the other doors, and selected 'Stage 46'. It opened with slight pressure from my fingers, and I found myself gazing out from the platform-guard's office onto the railway station where I usually catch my train home. I stepped out into open air. The platform was deserted, as were the lines — normally there were two or three rail-users hanging around, at least one train chugging in the sidings. But what was more astonishing was the lack of sound. Central Manchester is a busy place, and this station overarched one of its busiest thoroughfares. Now there was near-total silence.

I say 'near' because a couple of seconds later, I realised that somewhere close by, someone was talking. Looking round, I spied two people on the next platform. I stepped

back and took shelter behind an iron stanchion. I recognised them immediately. One was a platform-guard I'd frequently seen on duty there. His collar was open and he was drawing on a cigarette, which he then passed to the other person. That person I recognised from the train I catch every day; a burly businessman-type. As far as I knew he was just an ordinary punter like myself, a commuter into the city who had no connection whatsoever with the staff at the station. Yet here these two were, hanging around, talking like old friends.

I backed into the darkened corridor, closed the door behind me, and threaded my way back to 'Stage 48'.

You may wonder what possessed me to join the Airborne.

I don't know. I suppose it was something about 'if a job needed doing it was best to do it properly'. Once I'd made the decision, I was strangely unemotional. I wasn't even apprehensive. It was just another stage of my life. Mum expressed horror and disbelief, but Dad was vaguely

impressed — which means a lot more impressed with me than he'd ever been before — though I suspect he thought I wouldn't last too long.

That wasn't the first time he was wrong. You see, the hideous hardships of basic training at Depot Para in Aldershot, the frostbite on the Brecon Beacons, and the terror of the balloon-jumps at Brise Norton airbase, were as nothing compared to the irrelevance of my home life. A lot of tough young lads line themselves up for a red Ally beret, but there's more to surviving in hell than that. Basically, you have to have no alternative. What waits on the outside has got to be even worse.

I won't go into detail of what that next year actually involved, because too many phoney Hollywood epics have since rendered military stuff

boring, but put it this way, recruits dropped like flies. At the end of it all, when we'd finished our night-drops, were awarded our wings and signed a declaration that we'd never refuse to jump, there were only twelve left from our original intake of two hundred. This didn't surprise anyone. In the Airborne, seventy to eighty per cent casualties were commonplace, a grinning NCO told me on that last day, when I passed out and was posted to F Company, 2 Para, whose battalion lines were at that time in Belfast.

I'D NEVER DREAMED BEFORE DURING MY BLACK-outs, and that was what made me think the incident in the office was more serious than just a spot of the 'old trouble' returning, which I must admit is what I told Kathy it was that night, when she asked me why I looked so peaky. Secretly, I wondered if it was evidence of further or maybe worsening brain-damage.

The next day I went into work sweating. Kathy had advised that I phone in and report sick, but I knew that brooding around the flat all day would be no remedy. I



went in, hoping I'd be strong enough to ignore the secret door, but the first time I found myself alone, I approached it, knocked on it and, indeed, it opened.

Once again I ventured through. This time I took a different route. More cables, more flats, more stage-doors. The first one I tried was 'Stage 12'. To my horror, it opened behind a stack of lumber which we kept in our spare bedroom. I wanted to scream, but my throat was too dry and dusty. Instead, I closed the door and fell to my knees, cold sweat on my brow. A few minutes later, I tried the door again, and it still opened into our flat. With teeth gritted, I moved forward and explored every room, checking each detail I could remember from that morning — a pair of underpants at the top of the stairs, the video box for the film *Independence Day* lying open and empty in front of the TV. All were as they had been.

Heart thumping, I retreated into the stage-corridor. Moving haphazardly along, turning left and right, not really knowing where I was going, I suddenly found myself facing a pair of doors made from frosted glass. Bright light poured through, and there were cheerful voices on the other side. I pressed my face up close, and through the distorted panels, thought I could make out figures sitting around tables. I smelled cigarette smoke and heard the clatter of teaspoons on mugs, the scraping of chairs. And then there were more cheerful voices, the occasional burst of laughter...familiar laughter. Kathy's laughter.

A sharper chill than I'd ever felt took hold of me. I tried to back away. A man began to laugh as well. He sounded the way my Dad might have done, if he'd ever laughed in my presence. Another man joined him... It could have been Nick Jones, one of the guys I work with. As far as I know, he's never met Kathy. He's certainly never met my Dad.

More voices, more laughter... I desperately wanted to barge in, to laugh with them rather than demand answers, to crack a couple of jokes rather than beat and kick them for what they were doing to me. But I was frozen to the spot. I couldn't move a muscle. And then, suddenly, I could...because I heard someone coming. Glancing to my left, I saw hefty shapes advancing along the tunnel. I began to run, searching desperately for an avenue of escape.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I observed two men. They were dressed in paint-stained overalls and were now standing talking in the light from the glass doors. Stagehands, probably. I was forty or so yards away by this time, and they hadn't noticed me...and then my foot clanked against a hammer lying on the floor, and they instantly turned, and knowing that I couldn't afford to be found, I thrust myself through the nearest stage-door.

Belfast was an eye-opener. I thought things had been grim back home, but this was something else. Again though, I won't go into it. We're all familiar with the tragedy of Ulster, and I sampled it more than once, making three tours in all, and getting into nasty scrapes every time.

Of course, it's important to understand that getting into scrapes in the Army was not like getting into scrapes as a civilian. It didn't bother you much, because it was part of the job. And if you're of the inclination to smirk and write that off as bravado, just bear in mind the prolonged, inten-



sive and completely unrelieved training we'd been through, mentally more than physically...and the various groups who for the sake of the nation, we'd been drilled to mistrust if not actively detest.

Top of that list, inevitably, came the Irish — despite the fact that I, and probably a few of the other lads as well, had Irish blood in our veins; then there were the Ruskies — even though none of us had ever met one; then the East Germans — I'd never met one of those, either; then the Arabs — who nobody seemed to like; and finally the Americans — who I'd been assured were more likely to get me killed on the battlefield than the official enemy ever were. After all these, of course, there were the home-grown villains: the lazy hippy fuckers, for example, who half the time couldn't distinguish between reality and Mega City One, but who knew they hated Britain; the hard left and their chattering friends, who in those days were a force to be reckoned with (hey, this was a lifetime ago, remember); and basically all losers everywhere, who through weakness or resentment were available to be bought but who hadn't been deemed worthy to be bought by us.

If it sounds like a hellish state of mind, you're right...it was. But if you were the sort of odd-shaped individual who fitted into that uniquely paranoid world, there was also good stuff to be had: ploughing the steamy Wanchai furrow in Hong Kong, boar-hunts round the NATO base in Fontainebleau Forest, kicking the shit out of some GI Joes in a bier-keller brawl in Germany, exercise drops in lion-country on the blood-red Serengetti. It was all new, it was all an adventure.

And then, of course, there was the South Atlantic, in the spring of 1982.

You may recall something about that. How a tin-pot military dictator, one General Leopoldo Galtieri, head of Argentina's ruling junta, tried to prop up his tottering regime by snatching back the Malvinas, or the Falkland Islands as we knew them, thus incurring the support of his very divided people. And how, to his disbelief — though God knows why, because Britain's PM saw advantage in it in exactly the same way — a major military task force was sent down there to sort him out, thus igniting what was probably Britain's last colonial war.

You probably recall more about it than I do. On the 28th of May that year, I was part of a 450-strong paratrooper contingent used in an infantry assault against Argentinian positions surrounding the villages of Darwin and Goose Green. There were at least a thousand of them, they were well dug in and they'd been seriously threatening the southern flank of our offensive against Port Stanley. It was a dreary place, East Falkland, trackless moorland for the most part, permanently wet from freezing rainstorms. That's the main thing I remember about the action that followed.

It was the crack of dawn, and we'd already taken a place called Burntside House on the northern shore of Darwin Bay to use as a base-camp. The next objective was a ruined

farm-building called Boca House. This was well defended, and I remember we had to keep low as we went at it. It was still pitch black, and the wind and rain lashed us mercilessly. Every so often, a golden streak would pass by overhead, with a sonic boom trailing in its wake — Blowpipe surface-to-air missiles, courtesy of the Marines not too far behind us. Occasionally Harriers would swoop in on the enemy positions as well, and one of the frigates offshore was keeping up a steady bombardment. Altogether, it was total chaos, the ground shaking, eruptions of mud and fire everywhere. The stink of burning fuel set your head spinning.

As we advanced on their trenches, over open ground that was more like a swamp, I imagined the Somme or Ypres, though of course it wasn't on that scale. The job still had to be done, though, and the Argentinian defenders weren't kidding. They kept up a heavy rate of machine-gun fire, and we could only break through with anti-tank rockets and phosphorus bombs. After that, a lot of it was hand-to-hand.

We were armed with 7.62 SLRs, which were lethal at long range, but at close quarters like this, would tear a man into bloody strips. We also had commando knives, bone-hard fists and a heavy rep which wouldn't withstand it if we managed to lose the first land engagement of the war.

We didn't lose it, but I only found that out much later on. We'd just cleared the first line of foxholes, blood and dirt plastered all over us, and were making a battle-march on the next roll of wire, blazing like devils, when everything went black.

And it stayed black for quite a while...until they'd finished operating in fact, and removed the sizzling chunk of grenade-case which had torn a hole through my helmet and embedded itself in my skull.



FOR A FEW MOMENTS, I WAS IN DANK DARKNESS.

Then I realised that it was a cave. A faint light was visible at the far end, so I groped my way towards it, clawing over moss-covered rocks. When at last I emerged, I was on a sloping swathe of soggy grassland, in places churned to morass, in others charred and pocked with shell-holes. I knew it immediately. I was back on the isthmus: Goose Green, East Falkland. Everywhere I looked, weaponry was strewn: rifles, broken bayonets, daggers, shrapnel shards, torn-off boots, smashed helmets, empty bullet casings, bandolier belts...and of course, the barbed wire, at some points burned, at others torn and flattened, in most hung with shreds of khaki and bloodied flesh.

I was rooted to the spot as I gazed slowly round. Nothing had changed, even in fifteen years. It was as if the gunfire had only just stopped. To the far south lay the dreary Lafonian wastes. The HMS Arrow was still moored on the inlet from Falkland Sound. A frozen Antarctic wind was blowing, whipping the muddy grass in eddies. Of course things were a lot quieter now than they had been

in May 1982. The repeated thump of the Charlie-G, the screech of 29 Commando's chillingly accurate 105s were conspicuously absent. Likewise, the strewn bodies. What little I recalled about the battle of Goose Green involved dead and wounded men. Lots of them.

Extras, I now realised. Probably paid off long ago.

My head swam as I stood there. Did this mean that the fighting hadn't been real? Had it all been some superlative special effects sequence? And what of my wound? My mind raced back over the countless times I'd stood before my bathroom mirror, analysing the spider-web stitching on the right side of my head, now all but invisible because my hair had grown over it again. Gingerly, I probed it... The flesh was still thickly-ridged, still numb, in parts even tender.

They'd definitely operated. But had that been for effect? Had the following years of nausea and dizziness and black-outs been drug-induced maybe? Or had they gone as far as to actually maim me with shrapnel? On the other hand, had that been an accident? Maybe I was supposed to have survived the battle, and the script had simply been altered accordingly. I knew the ammo we'd been using was the real thing. I'd been too good a soldier to be fooled that way.

To prove the point to myself, I scanned the wreckage. An SLR lay prominent, apparently unscathed. It might even have been mine...the one I'd dropped the moment I became a casualty. I examined it: the safety-catch was off; by the feel and weight of the clip, it was at least half-full. I aimed low and let off a round. The thud and recoil were real enough, and a chunk of smoking turf tore up with the impact. These slugs were full-jacket and no mistake.

Satisfied with that at least, I shouldered the weapon and went back through the cave.

That night, as we lay in bed together, I questioned Kathy, but did my best to keep it delicate. "Is that why you didn't want to get married?" I asked.

"What?" she mumbled, half asleep.

"Well...because maybe you've decided you really feel something for me? And you don't want me to be hurt?"

A second passed before she switched her bedside light on and leaned up on an elbow, looking tousled but lovely. "What do you mean, 'hurt'?"

I shrugged, unsure how to continue. "Because...well, you know."

"No."

"Because it's all a fake of course."

True to my nature, I hadn't been able to keep it delicate for long. Kathy could only gaze back, visibly disconcerted. "What's a fake? Me and you?"

She was so genuinely upset at what she thought I'd insinuated, that deep inside I had to chuckle at her skill. She must have cost them a pretty penny.

"Well?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. And the rest."

She put a hand on my arm. "Craig, what are you talking about?"

For once, visible distress on her part didn't melt me. "I know, you know," I told her.

"I wish I did," she said.

I sat up. "There's no point pretending."

She sat up alongside me. "Have you been blacking out again today?"

"Pathetic," I replied.

Again she fawned, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Craig...why don't you go back to the doctor? You might need more medication."

I chuckled again. "I don't think so. I think that's the last thing I need."

"You're not making any sense," she protested.

And at that I suddenly got angry. "You know I am," I snapped. "You know!"

"What?" She was now pleading. "What, Craig, what?"

But it was late, and glad that I'd disturbed her, I lay back again and turned over. "Think it over," I said. "We'll speak in the morning."

And that was almost it, though at some Godforsaken hour of the night, when the bedroom was so black you couldn't see your hand in front of your face, she tried to talk again, nuzzling the back of my neck, running a hand along my arm. "Craig...are you alright?"

I shook her off. "In the morning, Kathy. We'll discuss it in the morning. Be thinking about it."

The next morning, though, she'd gone. The bed beside me was crumpled and cold.

They shipped me back home and offered me a desk job, but I declined. Six months later, in a blaze of glory — back home, that was, in Palookaville (I wasn't an officer, you see) — I accepted an honourable discharge and a reasonably decent pension. I could just about walk again, though I limped, one side of my body was numb and I was heavily prone to blackouts, which meant that I couldn't drive or operate machinery. To many, a prospective future of nonstop daytime TV might make suicide a preferable option. Not me, though not because I was of stronger moral fibre than anyone else. It's just that I'd been through a lot and had had my vision broadened.

Instead, I resat my O-levels, and one or two A-levels, and during my spare time penned a book called Enemies at the Door. It detailed my Army days, warts and all, dealing with the dark side of Britain's security service: the acute wariness that bred the new Spartans I'd been so proud to be a member of, and the hatred they'd fed us on to keep us in the trim; not to mention the wine, the women, the song; the brawling and swearing; the 'extreme prejudice'...all that blood and thunder stuff. But there was a spiritual dimension to it as well: how after years of desolation, I'd suddenly been given a reason to live by training to kill, and then I had killed — repeatedly, and then I'd suddenly been killed myself, at least for a short while. And at the end of it all, inevitably, how I'd emerged a more contemplative sort of bloke.

None of the mainstream publishers had wanted to touch me, but this spiritual part of it had got one or two of the religious presses interested, and eventually I was given a restricted distribution, which in 1985 secured me a place at London University to take a degree in Religious Studies. And that, I think was when my life truly began, because I met Kathy, who was on the same course. She quickly became the love of my life, not that we seemed destined to

hit it off, a politically motivated Irish Catholic and an ex-British Army squaddie.

I remember, at our first tutorial, we'd all been invited to introduce ourselves and take questions from our fellow-students, and after I'd said my bit, Kathy had immediately asked me what I thought about Bloody Sunday. I'd retaliated by asking her what she thought about Warrenpoint. Her response was that the men killed at Warrenpoint had been illegal interlopers. I'd replied that I'd hoped we weren't going to get into politics, and that as far as I was concerned, murder was murder was murder, whether it be the gunning down of fourteen unarmed civil rights marchers, or the blowing up of eighteen paratroopers on a routine patrol.

Later on that first day, I attended lunchtime Mass in the college Catholic chaplaincy — mainly because it seemed the thing to do — and Kathy was there, and when she saw me, she gave me an unexpected and lovely smile, and from that moment on I was smitten. I tell you, Kathy was a beautiful girl. She went for the bohemian look, favouring flared, faded jeans — when they were still out of fashion, remember — big floppy jumpers and tatty trainers, though none of this detracted from her lithe, very female figure. Her hair — flamed in that classical Irish way — was long and lustrous, and basically completed the picture.

I don't know what it was that drew her to me. I've never been especially good-looking, but I think the turmoil of my background, the physical damage I'd suffered, plus the fact that I always enjoyed a good argument with her, had a magnetism of some sort. I dressed like her as well — the beatnik style was still big in the mid '80s though leaning a little towards the grunge of the early '90s, and my old combat fatigues were hip on demos, especially at Wapping in February 1986, where I endeared myself even more to Kathy and her student radicals by taking out a riot-cop who was clubbing a fellow protester.

When we finally left college, having both won firsts, we were an item, and after applying for and getting jobs in the Christian press — me in Manchester, Kathy in Liverpool — we rented a flat together not far from my old home. Mum, who was just glad I'd finally done something with my life, and Dad, who'd taken early retirement and never looked back, liked Kathy from the moment they met her, though in a few quiet moments they expressed confusion that two 'religious' people should prefer to live 'in sin' rather than get married.

These days people might write that off as charmingly old-fashioned, but I didn't. I thought they had a point. It did seem odd. Or at least, it would have done if I'd been seriously religious. You see, secretly, I wasn't. I never had been. No more than I'd been seriously a student agitator. Maybe deep down I was a typical veteran — blank, hard, unimpression-

able as granite — though I think it was more simple than that. I've always wanted to believe that God sent his son to Earth to help us, and that the guy did everything he could, even to the point of accepting a terrible death purely to get the message across, but I found it too incredible. I'd seen too many shrieking victims of sectarian punishment gangs, their knees and elbows smashed with breezeblocks; too many informers garotted or neck-shot or suffocated in plastic bags, sometimes in front of their families; too much brutality generally.

The real solution to all things was very basic — especially if, like me, you'd had it pile-driven into you: pinpoint the problem, then pull the trigger on it, don't apologise to it for fucking living!

I found it hard to credit that intelligent folk like my fellow journalists, let alone Kathy, didn't understand that. They had to be kidding. At times, I wondered if they were kidding.

Now I know.



THE HOUSE SEEMED HORRIBLY quiet that morning.

What did I do? Follow her through the stage-door on the far side of the spare bedroom? Maybe that would be pushing my luck a little. For the moment, I'd box-clever. I'd go into work as usual. So I got dressed and set off by the normal route. The platform at my local station was almost deserted, however, and when I got on the 8:15 to Manchester, so was the train. One or two people were on board, and I imagined they were watching me over their newspapers.

Then the conductor, a dour Scotsman, came ambling along. "You alright, sir?" he said, as he checked my pass. "You look a little pale." In nine years, this was the first time he'd ever spoken to me. "Perhaps you should consider

going home and getting to bed," he said, staring at me with an odd, glazed expression.

"I'm fine," I told him. "Don't worry yourself."

Shrugging, he moved on.

When we finally got to the station, it was much quieter than usual, as were the streets beyond. One or two fixtures never seemed to change: the paper-seller on the corner, the bag-lady at the bus stop. Everywhere though, I imagined that people were watching me.

I ignored them all, and checked in as normal. No one was manning Reception or Switchboard, however. I entered through the advertising department, and though all the computers were on, again it was bare of life. I pressed on into Editorial and found that I was the first to arrive, which also had never happened before.

I booted up my system and waited. And the minutes ticked by. Nine o'clock came. Still nobody else had arrived. Knowing that the phones at Kathy's place would now have been switched on, I rang her number, but no one answered. I continued to watch the clock. 9:10. 9:15. 9:20.

I strode up and down, eventually stopping by the window. The few people I'd seen out in New Quay Street had dwindled to hardly anyone at all. In traffic terms, only the odd car or bus was visible.

"Okay," I said to myself. "If this is how you want it."

I crept to the stage-door and pressed my ear against the wood. There was no sound. Not that there ever had been before. Taking a deep breath, I tapped it twice and it clicked open. I glanced over my shoulder, and seeing nobody else in the office, prepared to step through.

But I couldn't.

About twelve of them were assembling there...no longer in the costumes they wore during working-hours, but done up entirely in black, heads as well as bodies, almost like Ninjas. No weapons were visible on them, but eyes gleamed cat-like through narrow slits in the material drawn tight over their faces. There was no doubt as to their intention.

I slammed the door shut and backed into the office, shivering. I suddenly felt helplessly alone and vulnerable. For the first time in my adult life I was frightened. As a Para, or ex-Para, that isn't something you're used to. But now I was wondering if I'd ever really been a Para. If there was even such a thing as a Para. They'd never met anyone like us, we used to say, the Argies, the Irish terror groups. Hooligan bastards could throw bricks and they'd bounce off us like tennis balls. Now I wondered if those bricks had been foam-rubber.

I supposed I was about to find out.

A weight creaked against the door. I saw the panel bulge, and in response, more by instinct than thought, I reached under my desk and hauled out the SLR I'd retrieved from the Goose Green set.

I didn't know exactly who those individuals were beyond that stage-flat; people I'd known in the Army or at school, workmates, my Dad, Nick Jones, Kathy, my Mum even? I don't suppose it mattered any more. I levelled the weapon, knocked off the safety, and just as I imagined the door was about to burst in, sprayed it with lead, drilling screaming rounds through the flimsy wood. It seemed to last for

seconds, and I had to steady myself, feet apart, as the rifle cocked and jumped.

When the magazine was almost spent and the smoke had cleared, a cavernous hole — jagged-edged and smouldering — occupied the space where the door had once been. I glimpsed through. Four black-clad bodies lay broken in the corridor. Blood was pooling around them, rather like spilled paint. Briefly, I wondered if it *was* paint. But no...these rounds were real.

The rest of them seemed to have high-tailed it. I considered giving chase, but sounds of panic from New Quay Street distracted me. I dashed back across the office and knocked a windowpane out with the stock of my weapon. The few pedestrians out there seemed to be running away down adjoining streets, or ducking into buildings. I took potshots at a few of them before I exhausted my supply, shrieking that I'd have them too, that I'd teach them to fuck around with me.

I don't know how many I bagged. Two at the most. More likely one. A bearded guy in student-type denim gear lay sprawled on a nearby crossing-point, a rucksack by his side. Bloody trickles snaked idly away from him.

I'm writing this account in my notebook, because a short while ago someone pulled the plug on the power and my computer fizzled out. I'm all alone. It's totally quiet, and not just in here either. I think a Sorry about that. I thought I'd had another blackout. But no, the lights fused, that's all. And not just in the office. Everywhere. Even outside. I'm now writing by match-light.

It's completely black. And silent. It's got that sort of 'everyone has left the building but me' feel. I wonder how long before they'll be back.

I'll tell you something, I'm not holding my breath.

PAUL FINCH's earliest writing credits were in television in the late 1980s, but since then he's moved into stage drama and prose. He's sold over 80 short stories to magazines and anthologies. He works as a journalist based in Manchester but lives with his wife and kids on the outskirts of Wigan.

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If God won't have them, the Devil must."
— Anon.

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BENEATH THE HOUSE OF SLEEP

AN INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN COE



by Nick
Sweet

Having found a seat in the Earls Court cafe where we had arranged to meet I riffled through the thick wad of notes I'd compiled after reading *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep*, wondering how on earth I was ever going to make any sense of what I had written, when I spotted the author through the window. Jonathan Coe is a tall, slim man of 36 with a full head of greying hair and striking, intelligent eyes; as I introduced myself, however, I was even more struck by his relaxed and affable manner, which seemed to belie the turbulent complexity of thought informing his work. Over cappuccinos we discussed life in London and our different domestic situations, with Coe proudly announcing that he had recently become a father for the first time. We gradually got round to his work, with me commenting that I thought his last two novels were very different. 'Yes, I suppose they are,' he agreed, but he went on to suggest that whilst all of his books were very different in terms of surface texture, of plot and design, similar things were going on beneath the surface in all of them. 'I think we're all writing our disguised autobiographies in a sense, but just in slightly modified and changed around forms each time.'

I asked him about the way that he presents the reader with fictitious transcripts of interviews which have supposedly taken place on *Newsnight*, say, and with newspaper articles from places like the *Guardian* in *What a Carve Up!*. I hadn't realised that an author could do this kind of thing without bringing the full weight of the law down upon his head: hadn't he run the risk of being sued for libel in adopting these techniques? 'Hmm,' Coe responded, 'well, I didn't really think that there was any chance that someone like me is going to get sued for that.' So what about the awful super-rich Winshaw family, who have Britain virtually carved up between them in the novel (hence the title): had they actually been based on real people? And if so, then was there any danger that members of the Winshaw clan might have been mistaken for prominent figures in the political life of Britain? 'Well, certainly if you're satirising a type rather than an individual then you can get away with a lot. But also it's a good idea if you can make all the details which are secondary to what you are trying to say fictional. You're on fairly safe ground then, I think. But also I've worked on the assumption that no one is going to come along and say, "Look, this complete shit of a person who sells arms to Saddam Hussein when he's meant to be Defence Minister is me!" I worked on the assumption that no one would do that...although some people are so vain that they'd probably do it anyway.'

I wondered how Coe had conceived of the awful Winshaws. 'Most of it is filtered through the media. I come from a middle class family on the outskirts of Birmingham, so the Winshaws' milieu is light-years away from my experience.' So where had the idea for the novel come from? 'It came from watching the film *What a Carve Up!* and deciding that I wanted to make the basic structure of the book from that.'

And how close was the character of Michael Owen (who in the novel is commissioned to write a book about the Winshaws) to Coe himself? 'I think that I'm similar to Michael in all sorts of ways, but he is eight or nine years older. I did that among other things so that he was able to watch the film when it was first released, whilst I first watched it on TV seven or eight years later in the late 60s. It was a film which haunted me as certain films do when you see them at an impressionable age. It's no great shakes as a movie, I can assure you, but certain aspects of it stayed with me. And when I saw it again in the 80s the title struck me as just the title I wanted for this particular book.'

It is an extremely good title, particularly with the references to farming and food, to social injustice and then, finally, to the gruesome horrors which take place at the end of the novel. 'Yes, I asked myself how I could make the plot of the film kind of work for the plot of my novel, and it was then that I had the idea that I would invent a family who would all meet together at the end of the book for the reading of the will and that a slaughter would take place. It seemed like a good metaphor really for the British class system, but I don't know whether families like that actually exist. But that's not really the point. I mean the Winshaws are all really cartoon figures anyway, they don't have the same level of reality as the other characters in the novel like Fiona and Michael. That's why I thought that if the novel was ever going to be adapted for the cinema then it would be nice if they did it in a kind of Roger Rabbit way, where you have real people playing most of the characters but the Winshaws were the only animated figures.'

Were there any plans to make a film of the novel? 'It was optioned by the BBC and they sat on it for about three years and then decided that they weren't going to do it. And it's now been optioned by a small British company to be developed as a feature film. I don't know whether they'll do it or not, but it would be hard because it's so long and complex. They want to do it in two hours, which is a challenge, I think, but I'm leaving them to it because I don't want to try to crack it.'

I recalled in more detail the incredibly gruesome nature of the end of *What a Carve Up!*, with eyeballs turning up in cherry bowls, people having their limbs lopped off and a whole heap of other such niceties. 'Yes, well, I wanted to work it so that the Winshaws all died in ways which were appropriate to their various misdemeanours,' Coe explained, 'and it was enormous fun to make up.' There was Mark the hapless arms dealer who loses his arms, and the rather apt message that had been scrawled in blood on the wall: A FAREWELL TO ARMS! 'That was one of the easiest to do, and for an arms dealer it's really a fairly obvious pun to use. But of course when you do stuff like that then you can get into translation problems. For instance when the book was published in Holland, I did an interview there and one of the journalists asked me why this character gets his dick chopped off in the last chapter, and I was really surprised because this just doesn't happen in my book. It transpired that the pun on arms doesn't work in Dutch so they made the pun on *weapon*, which apparently does work. But it's quite a radical change to what I wrote, I think,' he added with a dry chuckle, 'it really alters it quite a lot.' He went on to say that one of the nice things about writing *What a Carve Up!* had been the way that all the themes seemed to connect up once he'd got about half way through the novel, so that a question such as how to have the art dealer killed off seemed almost to answer itself: simply have him covered in gold paint. 'And then suddenly you have a reference to *Goldfinger* and the Shirley Eaton obsession which runs through the book, so it all seems to knit in.'

Another obsession of Coe's is the horror writer Frank King, whose novel *The Ghoul* is referred to in both *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep*. He had first discovered

King's books in the British Library; then, having learned that the film *What a Carve Up!* was loosely based on *The Ghoul*, he got hold of a copy and read it. 'It's a very bad British pulp thriller from the 1920s, but I found the language attractive as well as being easy to pastiche, and I do in fact work in several sentences from *The Ghoul* in the second half of my novel. And then I discovered that King had written a book called *The House of Sleep*, and so when I'd decided to write a book about sleep I got hold of King's book and read it to see if there was anything there I could use.'

Why had he chosen to write about the theme of sleep in his latest novel, *The House of Sleep*? 'Well, I don't really think that it *is* about sleep. It is on a surface level, of course, but it's also about a lot of other things. I've been interested in sleep for a long time because I used to sleepwalk up until a few years ago. One night I banged my head and cut my ear open on a bookcase and was rushed to casualty at four in the morning.' This sounded rather frightening. 'It wasn't frightening so much as disturbing,' Coe replied, and he went on to add that a very close friend of his was a psychiatrist. 'I spoke to my friend about my sleepwalking, and he told me where the current state of sleep research was, and how little people really know about sleep disorders, sleepwalking in particular. He told me about sleep clinics and that got me interested in the whole subject, especially in the clinic as a location. The way he described them they sounded like rather sinister establishments.'

I suggested that sleep deprivation seemed to be equated in the novel with spiritual deprivation, with the old adage about time being money, and with a right-wing outlook in general. 'Yes, well those ideas all emerged during the writing of the book, because I started out without having any particular attitude towards sleep.' So was there a sense in which he began working on the book without knowing what he was writing about? 'That's right, but I was attracted to the idea of writing about sleep because I felt that it would throw up lots of plot possibilities and comic possibilities. So I didn't have an attitude towards sleep when I started the book, but through creating and following through the character of Gregory — this guy who actually despises sleep and can't see the point of it — I started to think about what kind of person might take that attitude.'

An achiever? 'Yes, an achiever, exactly. A "winner" in American parlance, which is exactly the kind of person I'm most suspicious of. And so that gave me the idea that maybe going without sleep was related to power and ambition.' I recalled that Mrs Thatcher is referred to in this context in the novel and Coe replied, 'Yes, Thatcher was always very proud of not needing much sleep, of course, and I discovered that people like Napoleon also claimed that they didn't like sleep. Hitler too, apparently. But all this led me to think of sleep as a sort of signifier of humanity, really, and to think that anyone who deprives himself of sleep is denying himself a very important aspect of the human experience.'

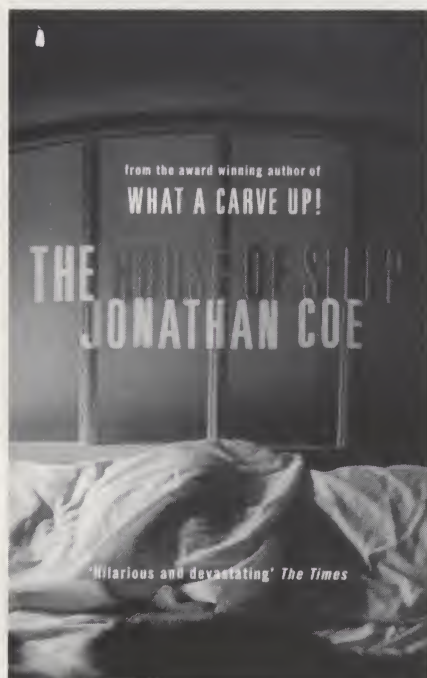
Coe does seem to argue in the book that power-mad individuals despise sleep because they hate the kind of vulnerability which goes with it. 'Yes, sleep must be completely abhorrent to a power junky, I should think, whereas I actually think that sleeping with one's partner is one of the most important aspects of a relationship.'

THE HOUSE OF SLEEP

Jonathan Coe

Penguin paperback, 342pp

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Ashdown is a vast cliff-top house located somewhere on the English coast. Once, when it was a university residence, a group of students met there briefly before going their separate ways. Twelve years on, it has become a clinic for sleep disorders, and a series of strange coincidences draws the same group of people together once again, each of them in different ways preoccupied by sleep.

Sarah is narcoleptic and he inability to distinguish between dreams and waking reality gives rise to many misunderstandings – one of which is to change Robert's life forever, as he attempts to win her love. Terry – whose career is derailed by another of Sarah's narcoleptically-induced confusions – is now a disillusioned film critic who cannot sleep at all, but who yearns for the tantalizing dreams of his youth, just as he used to search for lost films. And Dr Dudden had made the scientific study of sleep his life, because he believes sleep is a disease he must rid the world of...

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I suggested that we might talk about the sexual relationships in *The House of Sleep*, and wondered why Robert persists with his pursuit of Sarah even though it is patently clear that she is in love with Veronica (or Ronnie, as she is otherwise known); and what were we to make of Robert's decision to have a sex-change operation in the hope of winning Sarah round: was this obsession or love? 'I think it's love. And Robert is genuinely uncomfortable with his own gender, which is something I feel at times – although obviously not to the kind of extreme lengths that he takes it! I mean I like hanging out with groups of women more than I like going out with groups of men, and yet there is always that sense not of exclusion necessarily but of *otherness*, of not really belonging. At some point there is always some kind of intimacy or understanding they can have with each other which you can't be a part of, and that just struck me as interesting. I try to pinpoint an extreme version of that in *The House of Sleep*.'

Robert has the sex-change operation years later only to find out that Sarah's sexual preferences appear to have changed and she is about to marry a man. I wondered, therefore, if we were to conclude that Robert has made a tragic mistake in having the operation? 'No, I think that the important thing for Robert was to try to find out which sex he should be, and by the end of the novel he's found out that he wants to be a woman.' So were we meant to read this as a kick in the pants for New-Laddism, then? 'Yes, absolutely. I feel horrified by the kind of role models which certain men's magazines like *Loaded* and *GQ* project nowadays. And not only that but I think the whole thing is fiction because I just don't believe that there are men who are that macho and that empty and stupid.' But wasn't New-Laddism really just a rather crude attempt by some men to confront the kind of gender role confusions that have been thrown up by feminism? 'Yes, maybe, but the whole feminism thing is a historical fact. I mean, it happened and it's fatuous to try and pretend that it didn't by trying to return to the old stereotypical gender roles of the Forties and Fifties, which have become so redundant by now that it's absurd really. Anyway, I'm dead against certainty of any kind, whether you're talking in political or religious terms or in terms of gender roles.'

For Jonathan Coe, 'Confusion is a good thing, a creative thing.'

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TERENCE GREENHOUGH : THE FACTORY



ERIC SLADE

I don't like working for Jacob Slattery. He's a slave driver. He was a bully at school, and still is. Hardly a day goes by without him Exiting somebody, usually on a trumped-up charge of insubordination or shoddy workmanship. Slattery is the worst thing about working for Gold Standard Reclamations, which is hellish enough already. I think you're better off on the Rivers Project, in the Woodpile or in Dream-Fabrication.

These jobs are more highly paid, also cleaner, healthier and with greater security because of the Unions. Only the lowest of the low have to resort to filthy pestholes like GSR, where Unions are forbidden. We get paid on Fridays, the reward for seven days' sweaty, unrelenting slog: ten Euromarks, a bag of flour and ten tins of beans. On the Rivers project they earn fifty, a bit more in the Woodpile, and ninety constructing Dreams, though I think they have to buy their own fodder.

Anyway, there I was one Friday, Eric Slade, reclamation labourer Grade 5, watching a heap of corpses bobble towards me along the conveyor belt. One of them wasn't dead; he was struggling to squirm out from the bottom of the pile. How did he get there? Maybe he fell into one of the enormous hoppers, where the bodies are freeze-stored before being transported to the factories. Or maybe somebody pushed him in. In any event, he desperately wanted to escape.

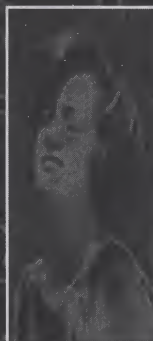
His hand, thrusting frantically at the air, was snatching for purchase, something to pull on, but there was nothing. Stamping on the stud to stop the belt, I grabbed his hand. The alarm buzzer went off as soon as the stud was depressed. The bunch of bodies, about fifty of them, swayed from side to side, and for an awful moment I thought they would fall off the belt. That would have meant trouble from Jacob Slattery's corrector-baton, perhaps even his Exit Needle.

Glancing to my left, I saw that Slattery was already there, a watchful, menacing figure holding both baton and needle. He did nothing to help, just glared through sharp, narrowed eyes. He could scarcely blame *me* for the hold-up, though he probably would. The bastard was singing 'Fifteen Men on a Dead Man's Chest', the corrector-baton dangerously close to me and the Exit Needle not far off, either.

I tugged at the trapped man's hand, trying to drag him out. Then I noticed his mad, glittering eyes. The ordeal had scorched his brain and to show his gratitude he was trying to pull me in! Slowly he was succeeding, stronger in his madness than me in my horror. The corpses kept wobbling — 'body language' we call it in the trade.

I had only one recourse: I snapped the man's arm over my knee, then I strangled him. *Now* he belonged on the belt. Briefly I wondered if Slattery would give me a bonus

for showing initiative, maybe an extra tin of beans, but he just wandered off without a word.



JULIE METCALFE

I'm Julie Metcalfe, Rivers Project. With any luck I should soon get a promotion, possibly to Assistant Planner. This would mean a salary increase; I'm already on the staff, on salary rather than a wage. I receive sick-pay and four months' maternity leave (unpaid), though I've always had good health and I've only taken ML twice, first for Celia and then for Ruth.

The Rivers Project is changing the pattern of Britain's rivers, diverting them to follow the abandoned railway network. Nobody wanted trains because they weren't cost-effective; Central Government scrapped them, in keeping with today's global ethos PROFIT IS ALL. Everywhere is capitalist now, the higher echelons reaping in vast wealth while the Lowlies work or starve. When they die, they go to the factories. That's both logical and profitable: one generation's waste becomes the next generation's profit.

A man I sometimes see, Eric Slade, is a Lowly in a GSR factory. He lives in an Anthill near my comfy-to-luxurious high-rise. I don't see a lot of him, only when I'm warming my flitter up on the airpads and he passes me on his way to GSR. Occasionally we speak, though he isn't much of a conversationalist; he can make inane comments on the weather, but that's about all. Actually he's a dolt. Probably I'll stop speaking to him; I wouldn't want to get a reputation.

Capitalism? Yes, of *course* I agree with it; why *not* grab what you can? It's silly to believe in equality; it doesn't exist and never has. Unfortunately there are still some throwbacks who bleat about the unfairness of society. They're a nuisance and should be shot.

Not all the rivers will be rerouted; some of the more picturesque riparian areas will be left as they are, catering for tourism and recreational sports. There will be limited access, obviously; if there are fewer rivers, it stands to reason that more and more social groups must be excluded. You can't tell *me* much about logic!

ERIC SLADE

At Gold Standard Reclamations, we have a box marked SUGGESTIONS. We're allowed to put bits of paper in it, with our ideas for increas-ing production and profitability; nothing about working conditions is permitted. Once a month Slattery takes the pieces of paper away, presumably to that fabled realm called The Office. None of us Lowlies knows where The Office is, and I've seen Slattery Exit workers for searching.

I'm sure the chemicals at GSR are dangerous. Last week we held a wake for Tim Carmody, GSR's longest-serving employee. Tim was among the toughest of us, a well-built man who seemed proof against malnutrition; his weight positively *refused* to go down, and I honestly expected him to make thirty.

Sometimes I wonder if I might be happier in the fields, picking beans, breadfruit or cannabis, all high-revenue commodities encouraged by the Govit. It's heavy work, but at least you get to breathe cleaner air and see the sky. They say the air isn't *too* bad outside the cities, and it isn't all that long since there were reports of people actually catching sight of the *sun*.

The other day I had a marvellous experience, when a dead Dream-Fabricator came rolling along the belt. You can easily recognise Dream-Fabricators by those flashy orange tunics they wear. This one also had gold-braid epaulettes, so he must have been pretty highly placed.

Those 'Dreamies' are terrible snobs, you know. They believe they get ear-infections if spoken to by a Lowly, so they won't communicate with one except through an intermediary. I'd like to suggest that all Dreamies cut their ears off as a health measure, but I can't get anyone to pass on the message. Everyone's scared of Dreamies, because they're said to come to you in dreams and hypnotise you not to wake up.

Anyway, along towards me came this Dreamy, a stiff slab of orange, dreaming the Everlasting Dream. *Did* I just give him some mistreatment while he was in my power! I kicked him, poked him, prodded him, punched him and did just about everything short of rape him. Isn't it said that justice should be *seen* to be done? Well, it was; all the lads stood there cheering as I cut off the Dreamy's nose and thumbed his eyes out. Thank God for justice!

Slattery saw it differently, and was displeased. I got a dose of the corrector-baton for my pains. Still, its correction wears off just when you think you're doomed to scream forever, and there are no lasting ill effects. It wouldn't do to harm a beast of burden, would it?

Where's the profit in that?



THE WOODMAN

It's fun working in the Woodpile. Reasonable pay, too. I take home forty-seven Euromarks after stoppages, which feeds both women and all seven children. I'm not really a Lowly, a bit above, but that doesn't make me look down on them. Some of the lowest Lowlies believe the Kindly Rulers encourage the propagation of Lowly young to produce tomorrow's labour-pool. How cynical can you get? The

Kindly Rulers call it 'forward thinking', and that's good enough for me.

I quite like the Lowlies. Okay, they rebel a bit now and then, but maybe they shouldn't be blamed too much for that; it can't be easy living in an Anthill, falling exhausted into a cot somebody just got out of. As for the Rivers people and the Dream-Fabricators — well, they've got curry on *their* rice, as the saying goes.

I don't agree with *all* the Kindly Rulers' responses to outbreaks of Lowly sedition. Those Anthills contain in excess of ten thousand, and a decent person has to feel *some* sadness when an Anthill gets vaporised — although it does keep the builders in work.

I have a pal who's a Lowly, Eric Slade at GSR. He's okay, is Eric. He makes no secret of the fact that he's not happy, yet he never mentions insurrection. The only thing we argue about is trees. Eric thinks it's wrong to cut them down. He simply can't accept that trees are eyesores, intrusions on the planet's obligation to give us space.

The Earth is for people, not for trees. Hell, there are eight billion of us! If I had my way, we would set about levelling the mountains and culling most of the lowland animal species. It will eventually come to that, so why not get people used to it at the outset? We're only asking for trouble if we don't.

It's great to have a friend like Eric. It helps me to keep things in perspective.

ERIC SLADE

Slattery gave me the corrector-baton again, the bastard! He caught me going through the pockets of our dead clients, pilfering. Yes, I know it's against the regulations, but it's a natural enough thing to do — every job has its perks, doesn't it? Besides, the factories turn you into ghoulies and so ghoulish behaviour should be expected.

I'd complain to the Union if we had one — if they hadn't sold their souls to the Govit.

Yesterday we had trouble in the Anthill. Some high-rise dweller, bored with his life of plenty, strolled in off the street and set fire to it. Six people dies, four of them children. The Fire Department has been instructed to 'rationalise' its priorities, on penalty of job losses. We managed to persuade the law-enforcement goons to come even without bribery, simply because several from the local station are pyromaniacs. They took the arsonist away, but I didn't like the way they kept congratulating him.

I can't stop thinking about that young woman in the flitter, that Julie Something. She's very pretty. I wonder if *she* likes trees? Her high-rise has labernum and silver-birch in the forecourt, and not a Woodman in sight.

If I chopped them down, I would be Exited.

JULIE METCALFE

The impertinence of that Slade! He walked past me this morning and said, 'Hello, Julie!' It was a mortifying experience, even though no one overheard. After daring to address me, he smiled at me and then went on his way, smirking at his discourtesy.

Naturally I shall have him killed. My promotion has been confirmed, and it entitles me to one Wild Card per annum. I am now empowered to set a Government-employed Exit Agent on a single Lowly each year, as a perquisite of status. Actually we're supposed to select those approaching their die-by date, but there are wrangles if you know the right people.

I'm going to make a point of speaking to Slade every day, just to remind him that he's on the Exit List. I won't tell him when or how I've arranged his Exit. I intend to

make him sweat. He won't know he's due for Exit in six months. I wonder if I can make him kill himself?

ERIC SLADE

Slattery died this morning. It was hilarious. The bastard tripped over a skull and fell on his Exit Needle.

Custom will be followed, as for anyone. His family will be allowed to keep his body for three days, then the Collectors will pick him up and pop him in a hopper. After that, he will in due course arrive at a factory, which may or may not be GSR's.

I had a full afternoon away from the belt. Management sent me to the Dispensing Department, where all the reclaimed chemicals, in tablet, liquid or powdered form, begin their outward journeys. My orders were simply to observe and learn, because I'm going to a menial job in Dispensing, at the same wage. If nothing else, it will be a change, and it will certainly be nothing else. What I'll be spared of the health-risk inherent in corpses, I'll be exposed to in chemical contamination. The hardest survival for about two years in Dispensing, then they die.

Perhaps they aren't so lowly then.



THE DREAM-FABRICATOR

It is an eminently rewarding experience, concocting Dreams. Though I say it myself, I am part of a fine profession, one attainable only by the finest of our race, given the noble birth so essential to success. We are the elite. As such, we are fully entitled to feel superior to all other humans, beasts or Lowlies upon the face of the earth.

My name is Gerald Wilkinson-Sloane, PPE — Professor of Psychological Enhancement

— and I live in a luxurious, 3-room aero-res. I am enabled, therefore, literally to look down upon the filthy, teeming Lowlies, scurrying like ants and as mindless.

I studied at the finest university, my particular discipline being closed, as is proper, to all not bred of two PPE-standard parents or possessed of the requisite dispensation from our cousins in Parliament. My children will have access to the same education, since their mother, Heidi, is also a Professor of Psychological Enhancement. She has, lamentably, certain fleeting, demented notions of having been *born* with no qualities higher than those of all categories below us. Heidi is a stubborn and unpredictable woman, though she does understand that Lowlies are *not* bred specifically for exploitation; she is not quite *that* unbalanced, even at her most radical.

Flitters frequently pass by our aero-res, piloted by curious highrisers eager to see those to whose positions they may not aspire. I am broad-minded about their inquisitive approaches, and do not agree that highrisers should be prohibited from these harmless little forays into loftier regions. My Bubble is set to maximum repulsion at all times, and it can be pleasantly diverting to watch those encroaching too closely upon my airspace explode.

No Lowly, of course, may avail itself of a Dream, even if it could afford the expense, which is a dream in itself. Infamously, there is a faction audacious enough to accuse us

of introducing *nightmares* as Dreams. They pretend that we infiltrate the more promising of lesser-status minds, in order to weed out those who might present problems by ambitions of rising in life and thus upsetting the *status quo*. Envy leads to some terrible examples of presumptuousness, does it not? I have even heard my profession denounced as 'the industry of mental emasculation', though not even Heidi would go that far.

ERIC SLADE

I hate it in Dispensing; it stinks. Obviously it smelt on the belt, but that was different. Here it smells *clean*, and my stomach simply can't stand it.

Julie Metcalfe is dead; my Woodman pal told me. She went joyriding in her flitter, strayed too close to an aeros, and got blown up. I will miss her — she probably never had an evil thought about anyone. She wouldn't have hurt a fly, even if they could get into the highrisers.

I can't see much future for me now, if any. If things don't improve soon, I shall kill myself.

I'll give it three months.

TERENCE GREENHOUGH published half a dozen novels in the 70s with NEL and Robert Hale, and has had many short stories published in magazines such as *SF Monthly* and anthologies such as *Andromeda*.

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Nicolas Roeg (born 1928) trod the hallowed but actually rarely-travelled path of advancement in the film industry: from clapper boy via camera crew to cinematographer and finally director. In the 1960s, he became noted as a cinematographer, particularly for his colour work on Roger Corman's *Masque of the Red Death* (1964), François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), John Schlesinger's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1967) amongst others. Of particular interest, in retrospect, is Roeg's last film before his directorial debut, Richard Lester's *Petulia* (1968): its focus on a dysfunctional relationship and its complex flash-back/forward structure seem more akin to Roeg's own directorial work than Lester's.

Performance began as a script by the late Donald Cammell, which he wanted to direct himself. But as Cammell had no directorial experience, the producers teamed him with Roeg (likewise looking for his first directorial credit), assuming that Roeg's expertise as a cinematographer would guide him through. Much of the credit for *Performance*'s distinctive style has gone to Roeg, as in Cammell's blighted later career we only had the fairly conventional *Demon Seed* (1977) to compare it with. Cammell's *White of the Eye* (1987) caused a partial reassessment. For his part, Roeg has always given credit to Cammell's contribution. *Performance* is a true collaboration.

Performance had a troubled history. Shot in 1968, its release was held up for two years due to its not finding favour with distributors Warner Brothers. Disturbed by its (for its time) strong violence and sexual frankness, with intimations of bisexuality and sadomasochism, they re-edited the film, which also suffered cuts (since restored) at the hands of the British Board of Film Censors. At least one American review referred to cinemas showing the film smelling due to members of the audience throwing up. The on-set ambience so unsettled Fox (whose performance, cast as he is against class, is quite remarkable) that he had a nervous breakdown, joined a religious retreat and made no more films for fifteen years. Largely due to Mick Jagger's contribution and Roeg's later reputation, *Performance* quickly gathered a cult following.

The film begins as a East End gangster thriller. This section, taking up the first half hour, benefited from technical advice from real gangsters, and was itself influential on later films such as *The Long Good Friday*. Chas (James Fox), a violent gangster, goes on the run after killing the gangster he was supposed to be protecting and hides out in the Notting Hill home of retired pop star Turner (Mick Jagger) and his two female companions, the voluptuous Pherber (Anita Pallenberg, Keith Richards's girlfriend at the time) and the gamine Lucy

(Michèle Breton). In the psychedelically-charged atmosphere of the house, aided by drugs and sex, Chas's sense of his own identity begins to come adrift.

Less important than the plot is *Performance*'s dazzling technique, a reminder of the days when such stylistic adventurousness could be indulged under the auspices of a major studio. The opening sequence sets the tone: after a puzzling couple of shots (a plane flying overhead and what looks like a space rocket taking off), we cut to an overhead shot of Chas's car driving down a country road. This is intercut with shots of Chas having sex with his girlfriend Dana (former Miss World Ann Sidney). The film's title appears over a close-up of Chas's hands holding a whip. The following morning: as Chas gets out of bed, we see the whip marks across his back. Later, as Maddocks (Anthony Valentine) beats Chas up and uses his own whip on him, we see glimpses of Dana's hands clawing Chas's back.

This cross-cutting, making associations between events separated in space and time, is typical of much of Roeg's work. Often we will see an image that seems puzzling at first, but falls into the film's overall pattern as it progresses. *Performance* is a dazzling work, but overmanned in places. Roeg and Cammell use the full panoply of camera effects – desaturated colour in some scenes, a change to grainy 16mm for an under-the-covers bed scene, a shot which follows the path of a bullet into a man's skull – but this is somewhat forced. Once Roeg ceased to be his own cinematographer, his use of such devices was reduced, though his distinctive editorial style remained. It's the opposite of the literary style more characteristic of British cinema, which makes it ironic that the majority of Roeg's films are adapted from books or plays – only *Performance*, *Bad Timing* and *Track 29* are original scripts.

As Chas stays in Turner's home, he becomes less sure of his identity, his sexuality, even his own gender. In one scene (quoted by Paul Schrader in *Mishima*) Pherber holds a mirror over Chas's chest so that it reflects her breast. Chas gets into bed with someone we at first think is Turner – but no, it's Lucy. During an acid trip, Chas imagines Turner entering Chas's own gangland world. (Jagger at this point performs the song 'Memo from Turner'. The soundtrack album for *Performance* is well worth hearing, featuring contributions from Randy Newman, Ry Cooder, Jack Nitzsche and others.) At the end, after Chas has killed Turner, in a subjective-camera shot he is led to a car and certain execution by his gangster colleagues. As the car pulls away, we see his face: Turner's. The merger of personalities is complete.

SLIPSTREAM CINEMA

2

NICOLAS ROEG: ABOUT EVERYTHING



by
GARY COUZENS

Walkabout begins with a series of shots set to Stockhausen's *Hymnen*: people on their way to work, children at school. A man (John Meillon) takes his teenage daughter (Jenny Agutter) and young son (Lucien John, the director's son, now a film producer under the name Luc Roeg) into the Outback. He tries to kill them and fails; he shoots himself. The brother and sister have to make their own way back to civilisation, and on their way meet an aborigine (David Gulpilil). There's an attraction between girl and aborigine but mutual incomprehension results in her rejecting his advances, resulting in his suicide. At the end of the film, the girl has grown up, is married. We see her greeting her husband come home from work. She remembers her time in the wilderness, but her memories are much happier and more rose-tinted than the truth. Working from a very spare script by Edward Bond (based on a novel by James Vance Marshall), Roeg sets up associations and parallels. The developing attraction between girl and black boy (as the credits call them) is contrasted with the coarse banter and flirtation of a group of scientists. He contrasts the unspoiled outback with civilisation's depredations: bulldozers and a graphic animal killing.

The difficulty of connection between the sexes is another perennial Roeg theme, explored most fully in *Bad Timing*. Although Roeg gives plenty of weight to the women in his stories, his is still an unmistakably male, and heterosexual, view. Roeg's films (at least those of his peak period, the 1970s and early 80s) are noted for their sexual candour. *Walkabout* is an exception (making it the only one of his films prior to *Insignificance* not restricted to the over-18s by the British censor), but it has its share of moments that feel uncomfortably voyeuristic: the girl climbing a tree, the camera positioned so it can look up her skirt; a topless scene near the end; and, most famously and for all its visual poetry, Jenny Agutter's nude swim.

The most famous sex scene in all of Roeg's films occurs in his next film, *Don't Look Now*. In a *tour de force* of editing, shots of John (Donald Sutherland) and Laura (Julie Christie) making love are intercut with shots of them, afterwards, getting ready to go out. It's a powerful, and very erotic, scene, notable as one of the cinema's few sex scenes between a married couple. This couple have lost their daughter in a drowning accident (seen in the opening sequence, also brilliantly edited). They are on holiday in Venice, and meet a couple of sisters (Hilary Mason and Clelia Matania). One of the sisters (Mason), who is blind, claims to be in touch with the couple's dead child. John scorns this, but he sees a figure in a red coat identical to the one his daughter drowned in. The ending is shocking and tragic.



JAMES FOX, MICK JAGGER IN PERFORMANCE



DAVID BOWIE IN THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH



THERESA RUSSELL, ART GARFUNKEL IN BAD TIMING

Don't Look Now is one of Roeg's most accessible films. In this film he seems to have found a new fluency: gone are the rather mannered camera tricks of the first two films. Partly this may be due to his handing cinematographic duties over to the capable hands of Anthony Richmond, who had shot second unit on *Walkabout* and was to photograph all Roeg's films up to *Bad Timing*. (They were later reunited on *Heart of Darkness*.) Another reason might be the discipline of working in a strictly-defined genre, the supernatural thriller. Certainly, *Don't Look Now* is visually beautiful (particularly in its use of out-of-season Venice, and the motif of the colour red), scary and memorable.

The Man Who Fell to Earth is a British production, though it was filmed and set in America. It is one of only two of Roeg's films (the other being *Bad Timing*) to be shot in Scope. Thomas Jerome Newton (David Bowie) is an alien landed on Earth. The film abandons the linear structure of Walter Tevis's original novel for a flashback construction. Gradually, it becomes clear why Newton is on Earth: to raise money for an expedition to save his arid home planet. On a first viewing, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* can be confusing – years pass between scenes, only indicated by the characters' ageing – and it is certainly flawed by overlength and a faltering pace in the final third. Newton fails in his mission, brought down by business machinations, sensory overload (a memorable scene shows him watching about twenty TV sets at once) and alcoholism. The film makes several overt references to Brueghel's painting, *The Fall of Icarus*. Plus factors include Bowie's best screen performance, and excellent work from Buck Henry, Candy Clark and Rip Torn. (Trivia note: Roeg originally considered for the role of Newton none other than novelist/film director Michael Crichton. Not an actor, he would have been cast for his height: 6'9".) Early on, Bryce's (Rip Torn) womanising is succinctly conveyed by a conversation in bed continuing without a break, the woman he is having it with changing from shot to shot. The use of 'Hello, Mary Lou' during a sex scene might seem obvious (Candy Clark's character is called Mary Lou), but it's a striking scene nonetheless.

Straight after the opening credits of *Bad Timing*, an ambulance races through the Vienna streets. Milena (Theresa Russell) has taken an overdose. As doctors struggle to revive her, Inspector Netusil (Harvey Keitel) interrogates her ex-lover Alex (Art Garfunkel, the third and last of Roeg's singers as leading men), trying to piece together what happened. Alex and Milena's destructive affair unfolds in flashback, proceeding more by free association than by chrono-

logy. Indeed, *Bad Timing* could well be the least chronological film ever made in the commercial cinema. For example, a shot of Netusil pouring sand out of an ornament leads to a flashback of a holiday in Morocco. A shot of a snake charmer cuts to the serpentine Arabic script on the side of the plane taking them home. Given close attention this can be followed (though a second viewing may well help), but Roeg uses other devices to locate us in time: Milena's changing hairstyle is one example. Or he would begin a scene with music on the soundtrack (The Who's 'Who Are You'), stopping when the scene cuts, then returning to it when we return to the scene.

What Netusil discovers is pretty nasty, and Roeg's bleakest comment on the relationships between men and women. *Bad Timing* did not find favour with the Rank Organisation, who had jointly funded it; one executive was quoted as calling it 'a sick film made by sick people for sick people'. As a result, Rank banned the film from their own cinemas (the Odeon chain) and removed their man-with-gong logo. (This is restored in video and TV prints; the only other Rank film to share this dubious distinction is Paul Anderson's *Shopping*.)

Bad Timing is the first Roeg film to feature Theresa Russell, who became not only his wife but also an important collaborator, appearing in *Insignificance*, Roeg's segment of *Aria*, *Track 29* and *Cold Heaven*. Although he has several long-standing professional relationships with technical crew, he rarely uses the same actor twice; apart from Russell, the only ones to appear in more than one film are James Fox, Michael Gambon and the late Daniel Massey, twice each. It's fascinating to speculate what *Bad Timing*, and indeed Roeg's entire later career, would have been like if he had gone with his original choice for the role of Milena, Sissy Spacek. (In some parallel universe this version of *Bad Timing* is playing in a double bill with the other film of around this time Spacek was set to play the lead role in, David Cronenberg's *Rabid*.)

If *Bad Timing* had a rough ride with its distributors, then so did *Eureka*. Made for MGM/UA, it suffered when the management of that organisation changed; the new régime effectively buried the films made by the previous one. In the USA, the film was shelved before being given a limited release in 1985. In the UK, it was released at one London cinema (the Screen on Haverstock Hill) in the summer of 1983. It was then withdrawn for a while, then released with just one print, which had become damaged when I finally managed to see it the following year. A pity, as the camerawork of Alex Thomson (Roeg's camera operator in the 60s, who also photographed *Track 29*) is magnificent, and video does



RUTGER HAUER, GENE HACKMAN, THERESA RUSSELL IN EUREKA



MICHAEL EMIL, THERESA RUSSELL IN INSIGNIFICANCE



THERESA RUSSELL IN TRACK 29

not do it justice. If any film is crying out for reissue it's this one, in many ways Roeg's masterpiece though not without its flaws.

We start in the Yukon, in the 1920s. Jack McCann (Gene Hackman) is a gold prospector who strikes it unbelievably rich. Now it's the 1940s. McCann lives in the Caribbean with his wife (Jane Lapotaire) and daughter Tracy (Theresa Russell). In the process of gaining everything he could ever want, McCann has lost his soul. When death, in the shape of gangsters trying to muscle in on McCann's wealth, instead of resisting, he embraces it. All this is conveyed in a series of quite brilliant images; where the film falters is in its final half hour, after McCann's death, where a courtroom scene laboriously spells out verbally what we've already been told visually.

Insignificance, an adaptation of Terry Johnson's play, brings four American archetypes: The Actress (read Marilyn Monroe – played by Theresa Russell), The Scientist (read Einstein – Michael Emil), the Actress's husband, The Ballplayer (aka Joe DiMaggio – Gary Busey) and The Senator (McCarthy – Tony Curtis) in a New York flat for a disquisition on fame, sex, death and relativity. It's a witty, extremely well acted (Russell's Actress should have won her an Oscar nomination) that overcomes its dialogue-heavy stage origins to become quite cinematic. It's also Roeg's last really good film.

This is the danger of creative artists who are still alive and producing work. If Roeg had stopped there, we would regard him as a master, rather than the master in decline he is. But the decline was setting in.

Castaway is a very competent, well-acted version of Lucy Irvine's true-life account of the year she spent on a desert island as 'wife' (played by Amanda Donohoe, in her debut) of Gerald Kingsland (Oliver Reed, in his only acting performance of note in the last fifteen years). Roeg filmed the story in sequence as an examination of a marriage. But there's a fall-off of energy here, and Roeg's visual juxtapositions (such as the contrast between the well-fleshed legs of the couple's imagination with their emaciated reality) are beginning to seem contrived.

Aria is an anthology film: ten directors' interpretations of ten famous operatic arias. The final result is a slight, very uneven though watchable collection of what are in effect upmarket pop videos. Roeg's segment features a bearded Theresa Russell as King Zog of Albania. It's one of the better ones. *Track 29* is a disastrous coupling of the seemingly ideally-matched but on this evidence incompatible talents of Roeg and scriptwriter Dennis Potter. *Cold Heaven* suffered the ignominy of being the only one of Roeg's cinema films to go straight to video in the UK. *Two Deaths*, financed by the BBC, is further evidence of a great talent at low ebb.

An exception has to be made for *The Witches*, Roeg's only children's film, based on Roald Dahl's book. At first a children's film seems an odd choice for Roeg to make, but he seems to be enjoying himself here. Probably too scary for the very young, it's enjoyably nasty, fast-paced fare, with a memorable performance from Anjelica Huston as the chief witch. (Dahl, by all accounts, loathed it.)

One can only speculate on the causes of Roeg's decline. Perhaps the treatment *Bad Timing* and *Eureka* received took something out of him. The climate of the 1980s could hardly have been congenial to films that, like *Bad Timing*, show sexual relationships as destructive, or, like *Eureka*, depict fame, fortune and success as a poisoned chalice. Also, post *Star Wars*, commercial cinema is much less welcoming to the stylistic adventurousness (and downbeat endings) that Roeg's 70s films display. Whatever the reason, there is a lesson to us all. Talent is finite, and it can and does grow cold.

FILMOGRAPHY (AS DIRECTOR)

- 1970 **Performance**
with Donald Cammell; also photographed
- 1971 **Walkabout**
also photographed
- 1973 **Glastonbury Fayre**
documentary; 'location director', also co-photographed
- Don't Look Now**
- 1976 **The Man Who Fell to Earth**
- 1980 **Bad Timing**
US title *Bad Timing: A Sensual Obsession*
- 1982 **Eureka**
- 1985 **Insignificance**
- 1987 **Castaway**
Aria
'Un ballo di maschera' segment
- 1988 **Track 29**
- 1989 **Sweet Bird of Youth** [TV]
- 1990 **The Witches**
- 1992 **Cold Heaven**
- 1994 **Heart of Darkness** [TV]
Two Deaths
- 1995 **Hotel Paradise** [short]
Full Body Massage [TV]
- 1996 **Samson and Delilah** [TV]

Selected recommended further reading:

Peary, Danny, 'Performance', *Cult Movies*, 1981 [for a very different opinion to mine!]; 'The Man Who Fell to Earth', *Cult Movies* 2, 1983; 'Walkabout', *Cult Movies* 3, 1988

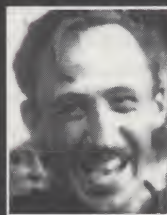
Sanderson, Mark, *Don't Look Now*, BFI Modern Classics, 1997

Spencer, Neil, 'Sympathy for the Devil' [on the making of *Performance*], *Uncut*, February 1998

Editor's note: also recommended, Neil Sinyard's *The Films of Nicolas Roeg* (Letts, 1991).

Stills courtesy of the BFI

mat coward's twisted obsessions



Like you, I spend most of my waking hours worrying about what records to choose on *Desert Island Discs*. But it's not good, you know, all this worrying. It's got to stop. So here's the solution: a scientific formula, *scientifically designed* to take the frettin' out of pickin'.

We start with two tables. A table on one hand of the discs, the records, the recordings, the *sounds* — call them what you will, it's your life — which have made it onto the final shortlist. About one hundred tracks, I would estimate, is usual at this stage.

On the other side, we have a table of *criteria*. You may devise your own such, but I would strongly recommend that you do not drift too far from those proposed by me, since, I would remind you, these have been *scientifically designed*.

These are the criteria:

*Artistes who must be represented in the final selection, eg Slade, or Sonny Boy Williamson

*Decades which must be represented, eg the 1960s or, as it might be, the 1840s or 2080s

*Songs included for sentimental reasons, eg songs popular during courtship, or which were heard during the father's funeral (either intentionally or otherwise), eg *The Ying-Tong Song*

*Songs reminiscent of specific persons and events in the selector's life; mainly, therefore, songs of loss and pain

*Tracks included for purposes of didactics, such as a track which the selector wishes to have broadcast for reasons of political propaganda, eg *The Red Flag*, or a track recorded by a friend or relative of the selector's which has not sold as well as it should


*Genres of music without which the selector would not wish to live the remainder of his life, eg hillbilly-punk or glam-jazz

*Tracks which are included primarily to cause embarrassment to the BBC, this category principally consisting of songs from which it would be impossible to extract an obscenity-free passage of more than four seconds' duration

The mathematical process which now follows is quite straightforward, and need not cause undue dread or loathing. Simply, one uses the table of criteria as a *calculating engine*, through which one runs, one by one, each of the shortlisted tracks. For every 'hit' that a track records against a criterion, it receives one point (or two for embarrassing the BBC). So that, for instance, Ivor Biggun's *Winker's Song* (*Misprint*) might score as many as eight points, depending on the particular circumstances of the individual selector's history, and his views on life in general.

In the event of a tie (and it is not entirely unknown for this process, albeit scientifically designed, to produce an 'ultimate' shortlist which is up to fifty per cent longer than the original shortlist), it is a simple matter to add another *criterion*, and perhaps subsequently another and another, until eventually, through repeated application of the method, we are left with no more nor less than the eight records allowed.

A further refinement of this system is the use of 'Wild Cards' to preserve an element of spontaneity and *joie de vivre*, by selecting songs which are loved *sans* reason or limit, without undermining the essentially *scientific* nature of the method. However, this is a complicated matter and would most probably be beyond your understanding.



THANATOPHILE SEEKS SIMILAR

JAMES
LOVEGROVE

THE DARK MAN OF YOUR DREAMS. SLENDER, morbid, pallid, prefers black clothing. Would you be willing to meet me?

There were four of them in the waiting room, three old women and Alice. All four sat apart, with at least one empty plastic chair between each of them, but the old women shared a bond that physical separation could neither disguise nor diminish. Every now and then their gazes would meet and looks of implicit understanding would pass across the room. They were in on a secret — the secret that came with false teeth and cloud-cotton hair, with joints that sang arias in the morning, with husbands buried and children mourned. All three had heard the whisper of their own mortality for longer than they could remember, so long that they had learned to ignore its hissing, wheedling voice. In twisted bodies they skipped and danced ahead of the inevitable, encroaching end, and no one could tell them they had outlived their usefulness, for while they remained alive they were reminders to all of the feebleness of death, object lessons in the infuriating capacity of the human body to survive.

And Alice? Alice, for once in her life, was not acutely conscious of being excluded from a group. Her attention was entirely focused on the newspaper in her hands, the *Argus and Recorder*, and on the advert in the back pages of that newspaper which had seized her attention and suddenly transformed the game of reading the Lonely Hearts columns into something much more serious.

The Dark Man of Your Dreams.

Usually Alice perused the Lonely Hearts with an idle, ironic eye, wondering why, if half the things these people said about themselves were true, they had to advertise for love at all. Love, surely, was hammering down the doors of Attractive, Outgoing Blondes and Genuine, Sincere Guys. How could anyone blessed with a Bubbly Personality and a Good Sense of Humour walk down the street without being mobbed by love?

Alice had always believed that, no matter how bad things got, she would never stoop to taking out or responding to a Lonely Hearts advert. If nothing else, she was by nature too fatalistic for that. Unless her ideal companion happened along in the natural course of events, she had resolved to be content to do without. Like all closet romantics, Alice was waiting for the thunderbolt, and until that came — if it ever came — she wouldn't accept anything less.

But sometimes lightning can strike with a sound no louder than the dry rustle of newsprint.

Slender, morbid, pallid, prefers black clothing.

What kind of man would list those characteristics as his best points? One, she thought, with few illusions about himself. One who demanded honesty from himself and from others. That was attractive. Lies had teeth, and Alice bore the psychic bitemarks of a lifetime of disappointments, deceptions and mortifications.

The three old women sat in silence, nodding to themselves and one another. Their whiskered lips were parted in pearly-grey half-smiles, and their eyes, yellowed from decades of seeing, glistened with the knowledge they had accumulated.

Would you be willing to meet me?

Willing, maybe. Curious, certainly. But was she brave enough? Did she dare? It would take every ounce of courage

she had to write to him. What if he didn't reply? Worse — what if he did?

Alice shook her head at the stupidity of it all. She knew what she was really going to do. She was going to put the newspaper back on the waiting room table among the stacks of magazines and comics and forget all about the advert. It had been fun for a moment to pretend that she had been about to get a grip on her life and seize an opportunity, but that moment was over now and everything was back to normal.

But when Dr Muirhead poked her head out from her surgery and asked Alice to come in, Alice calmly folded the *Argus and Recorder* up as though it was her own copy and stuffed it into her shoulder-bag before standing up and going through.

And the three old women nodded along in rhythmic unison, confirming the secret they shared. It would be Alice's secret, too, in time.

"SIX AND A HALF STONE IS NOT A HEALTHY WEIGHT,"

Dr Muirhead had said, but Alice had heard it all before and felt that the doctor, who erred on the side of plumpness herself, could have no way of understanding what it was like to be stuck in a body you loathed. Dr Muirhead's sheath of subcutaneous fat, which seemed to be distributed evenly over every square inch of her, even the tips of her fingers, was a sign of contentment. Dr Muirhead was comfortable with who she was. Alice was not, and her protruding bones proved it. She was on the rack of her own ribs. Outwardly was how she felt inwardly: ungainly, unattractive, angular.

"I can't stress how important it is that you discipline yourself to a proper diet," Dr Muirhead had said, but what did she know? She probably kept éclairs in a drawer of her desk. "Otherwise, if you don't stop punishing yourself in this way, we may have to consider the possibility of having you admitted to a clinic."

On the bus rumbling home, Alice took out the newspaper again and reread the advert. Well, what harm could it do? He never had to see her. It could be a purely postal relationship. Penpals. And if, after the exchange of several letters, she thought she knew him well enough to trust him, then she might — only might, mind — propose that they meet.

She would ask Monica's advice when Monica came home.

BUT BY THE TIME MONICA CAME HOME, ALICE HAD already written the letter. She had gone through three drafts and thought she had it perfect.

Dear 'Dark Man of My Dreams',

If I start by saying that I'm not the sort of person who normally does this sort of thing, would you believe me or would you think I was protesting too much? I just don't want you to think I'm someone who regularly turns to the *Lonely Hearts* columns in a constant, desperate search for affection. I'm not, and on the strength of your advert I don't think you are either.

My name is Alice, and I am not slender (at least, I don't think I am), but I am morbid, I am pallid, and I do prefer black clothing. So when I first saw your

advert, as you can imagine I thought I must have placed it myself. From somewhere on high I heard a voice say, 'Snap!' That was how it felt, and that's why I'm replying. From what I know of you — and I know almost nothing, and yet I feel that I know you very well — I think we have a lot in common. Not just interests in common, but a similar, for want of a better phrase, spiritual outlook. I could be jumping the gun here, and I don't want to presume to tell you who or what you are, so instead I will tell you about myself, and if any of it strikes a chord then perhaps you will consider writing back.

I am 22. I don't have a job. I was taking a degree in Social Sciences but dropped out in the second year for medical reasons. I live with a friend called Monica, who is much older than me and a health visitor. I like rock music, the darker the better. I adore *The Cure*. I prefer winter to summer and autumn to spring, and I am at my happiest sitting alone in a curtained room listening to the sound of my own heartbeat.

Of course I may be wrong about you and you may find all of the above a complete turn-off, in which case I'd be obliged if you didn't go to the trouble of replying. Your silence will be your answer. If, on the other hand, you're interested in continuing this correspondence, then I'd be very happy if you did so.

Sincerely,
Alice

And not wanting Monica's opinion on the letter, because if Monica was anything less than wholeheartedly enthusiastic then all that work would have been for nothing, Alice sealed it in an envelope, checked she had addressed the envelope to the correct box-number, and went down to the postbox and mailed it.

She spent the next three days in an agony of uncertainty and regret. Not one minute went by when she didn't wish she could turn back the clock and pluck the envelope out of the postbox the instant before it disappeared. She even contemplated telephoning the sorting depot to ask if the letter could be stopped. What had she done? What had she done?

It was only on the fourth day that a sense of resignation set in, moving across the country of her mind like a cold front on a TV weatherman's map, and when a fifth day passed without a reply, and then a sixth, she accepted that she had made a fool of herself. Somewhere, someone was laughing at her. It was nothing new. It was no less than she deserved for taking matters into her own hands. Her life was so much easier when she left the running of it to other people, and she had been mad to hope otherwise.

A week after she answered the advert, the reply came. Monica handed the envelope across the breakfast table without a word. Alice knew Monica expected to be told whom it was from and what it contained, and surprised her by not opening it there and then. Instead, with a coolness that astonished even herself, Alice sat and drank her tea (no milk, no sugar) and read the newspaper and studiously ignored the scrambled eggs Monica had made for

her and even more studiously ignored Monica's searching glances. She did not know for sure that the letter was from the Dark Man of Her Dreams, but then when was the last time she had received a handwritten envelope? Besides, the envelope was addressed simply to 'Alice'. (She had deliberately not given her surname, fearing — as demons do — that names have power.) Who else could it be from?

Monica had to go to work and was angry that Alice was keeping something from her. She slammed the front door. When the clacking of her heels on the pavement had faded away, Alice took a table knife to the flap of the envelope. Inside were two sheets of feint-ruled A4, folded into quarters.

Dear Alice,

You know me. You have always known me. There is no other explanation. If you did not know me, you would not have known how to sell yourself so well to me. I do not mean that to sound pejorative, but what else do we do to each other all the time but sell ourselves? Our clothes, our habits, our mannerisms — these are the methods we use to advertise our souls. Most people window-dress to a ludicrous degree, gift-wrapping their true selves in tawdry tinsel lies. They are terrified that, if they don't, the merchandise will seem hopelessly bland and dull. You, Alice, are smart enough to realise that the only way to avoid the inevitable disappointment we cause to others when our true ordinariness becomes clear to them is by not heightening their expectations in the first place. That is good. You have saved both of us the effort of tearing down one another's artifices. Honesty begets honesty, and so I shall give you nothing but the unadorned, unvarnished truth about myself.

My name is David, I am 25, I live alone and work alone. I have no friends. There are some acquaintances from school I see every so often. We drink in a pub and they reminisce about the only time they were happy, when they were children living under the wing of their parents, the real world a place far beyond the walls of school and home. They are sad and bitter now because nothing they have encountered since matches up to the blissful security of that time. I, on the other hand, was blessed from an early age with the knowledge that life is cruel and pointless and hard. I entered adulthood with my eyes open. Nothing could surprise me. I knew — and nothing I have seen yet has altered my opinion — that every day of my life is no more than a tick on a calendar marking my progress towards death. Why deny that fact? Why not embrace it? To think otherwise, to treat life as a journey towards some worthwhile goal, some great reward, is to delude oneself. We are born to degenerate and die. Accepting this liberates.

Alice, I have to say that your letter has excited me. I feel that I may have unearthed a kindred spirit, a fellow bearer of the Cross of understanding, and that my lonely vigil may be at an end.

Yours,
David

Alice went for a walk in the park, taking the letter with her, and after ten minutes of strolling beneath the black-leaved trees sat down on a bench to rest her aching legs.

There, she took out David's letter and read and reread his words until she knew them by heart. What a mind he had! He had taken the raw stuff of thoughts that were only just forming in her mind and spun from it a single coherent strand, making sudden sense of almost everything that had confused and perplexed her these past couple of years.

And she felt justified, she felt *vindicated*, and the feeling thrilled her. The courage it had taken to reply to the advert was now a permanent part of her. She would never need to screw herself up to that pitch of bravery again.

Fizzing with new-found confidence, she wrote back to David.

Dear David,

I can hardly believe I am about to do this, but then we are not strangers, not now. Somehow we have skipped that awkward phase.

Will you meet me?

The time and the place can be of your choosing. I am flexible. Lunchtime, evening, whenever. I am always free. At least, there aren't any appointments I can't cancel.

Perhaps at your home address? The gatehouse?

Yours,
Alice

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS ALICE WAS A DIFFERENT person. Though she still only picked at the meals Monica cooked for her, eating perhaps one floret of broccoli or a few forkfuls of green salad and pushing the rest around her plate, in every other respect she showed, and felt, a relish for life which, when she thought about it, made her habitual state of despair and self-loathing seem absurdly, pointlessly blinkered.

Monica couldn't help but notice the change, though she commented on it only obliquely, when she heard Alice singing 'The Lovecats' to herself one morning: "Been at the happy pills again, have we?" She was still sore at Alice for not confiding in her about the letter, and Alice felt guilty about that and promised herself that when the time was right she would tell Monica about David. But that time was still some way off, if it ever came at all, and anyway she could see that Monica was secretly pleased that she was not moping around as usual, and this, undoubtedly, was a bonus for both of them.

"YOUR ANONYMOUS CORRESPONDENT," MONICA said dryly as she handed Alice David's next letter.

Alice took it to her room to read.

Dear Alice,

Next Friday, the 17th, 1 p.m. Come to the gatehouse. I'll supply the lunch.

Yours,
David

She was going to meet the Dark Man of Her Dreams.

THE FACE IN THE BATHROOM MIRROR THAT FRIDAY morning startled her. She almost didn't recognise herself.

Her eyes were hollow in their sockets, her forehead was unnaturally large and domed, her cheekbones loomed like angels' wings, and she could see the ridged outline of her teeth beneath her thin skin — their roots seemed to reach all the way up to her nose and all the way down to the bottom of her jaw. When had this happened, this transformation from girl to living skeleton?

She hid it as best she could with make-up, which she hadn't worn in ages, but the crimson of her lipstick only served to draw attention to her outsized teeth and the shadows cast by her blusher only accentuated the cavernousness of her cheeks. By the light of the small strip-bulb above the mirror she looked ghastly, haglike. If she repelled herself, God knows what David what think of her.

She decided not to go.

At midday she cleaned up the smeared mascara around her eyes, wiped her nose and decided she would go after all.

In her best black velvet dress she walked to the bus stop and boarded a bus that took her thought the heart of the city and out the other side to the Riverwood Cemetery.

This was not the first time Alice had visited the Riverwood Cemetery. During her first year at university she had spent many an afternoon there wandering alone, undisturbed, untroubled, uninhibited. Among the gently curving pathways and white headstones, with all the quiet dead beneath her feet, safe under two yards of soil, she had felt utterly at peace. The crosses, tombs, small mausoleums and penitent marble angels held no threat for her. Rather, they promised release. *Soon*, they whispered, *it will all be over*. It was the only guarantee she had had at the time, and she had clung to it as though nothing else on earth mattered.

Stationed between two long stretches of spiked iron railings, the gatehouse arched over the southern entrance to the cemetery, rising to red-brick crenellations. Its windows were leaded in a diamond pattern, and ivy crawled across one flank like broken veins in an old man's face. It had never occurred to Alice that anyone might live there — the purpose of the gatehouse had always seemed symbolic rather than functional — but now that she thought about it, as a home for one person it wouldn't be at all unpleasant, assuming you didn't have a problem with graveyards. It was the sort of place where she herself could quite happily have stayed.

The bus dropped her off right outside. She hesitated only briefly before pressing the ceramic bellpush set into the brickwork beside the bolt-studded wooden door.

Footsteps descended a spiral staircase, and the door opened.

"Alice."

She looked at his eyes first. The eyes could tell you so much. His were hazel, with stars of jade-green about the pupils, and stared at her as though her face was a computer screen filled with mesmerising information. They were set in heavy lids, with faint purplish crescents beneath them that suggested pain and sensitivity. The rest of his face was pale and tapered to a chin that was more pointed than squared. He had full lips, maroon like a Slav's, and a long fine neck in which the jugular veins lay proud against the lean muscle. He was wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt which hung loosely on a frame that was, as he had

promised, slender. His hair, too, was black and, if the uneven fringe was anything to go by, self-cut. But it was his eyes Alice returned to and met with a steady gaze of her own, not only because she didn't want to appear to be avoiding them but because they fascinated her and were, in turn, fascinated by her.

"You're everything I thought you'd be," David said. He was carrying a rolled-up blanket and a lightly laden supermarket carrier-bag. "I've got the picnic things. Shall we go for a walk?"

He led her through the cemetery gates and along the narrow streets of the necropolis, choosing his turns confidently, until they came to a spot Alice knew well, where a semicircle of silver birches cast their skeletal shadows over two raised tombs that sat side by side like solid stone tables, their surfaces encrusted with saffron lichen. Autumn rooks croaked overhead. David made a cushion of the blanket on one tomb and beckoned Alice to sit there, then settled himself down on the other, facing her. Their legs dangled, knees not quite touching, toes not quite reaching the lawn.

"I don't eat much," he said, offering her a thinly-cut tuna-and-salad sandwich, which she nibbled politely. They drank bottled water, and the sun, a cold yellow pebble, rolled across the sky.

David told her that he was writing a work of philosophy that was going to unite all the philosophies of the world, a massive undertaking which had so far consumed three years of his life and looked set to take up another seven or eight. Alice hoped he was going to discuss the work-in-progress with her, sound out her opinions, but instead he moved almost immediately on to another subject, explaining how he earned a living as a caretaker for the cemetery, one of a team of five who mowed the grass and pruned the trees and clipped the hedgerows and swept the pathways of leaves and generally saw to it that the homes of the dead weren't neglected even after the bereaved had long since ceased coming to pay their respects. He did not dig graves because Riverwood had reached capacity several years ago and new land had been found elsewhere for the newly deceased. One of his other duties was to make sure that the graves weren't vandalised or despoiled, and at dusk each evening he patrolled the grounds to check there was no one loitering inside before he locked the gates.

This prompted Alice to ask, "Do you walk around in here at night? Just you and the moon and the wind?"

"Sometimes. When there's enough light to see without a torch. Then I can sneak up on couples without being spotted."

"Couples?"

"They come here to fornicate. Even though the gates are locked, there are still ways to get in, if you're desperate enough."

She could barely bring herself to ask the next question. "Do you watch them? I mean, everything they do?"

"Sometimes." He shrugged and smiled. "The unvarnished truth. Wouldn't you?"

"I don't know. Yes, I might, I suppose."

"Here." He tapped her knee. "Come on. I've got something to show you."

They gathered up the unfinished picnic and set off across the grass between the parades of headstones, David running

at a gentle lope, Alice doing her best to keep up. Normally this kind of exertion would have been beyond her, but David's sudden burst of energy was infectious, and her legs and lungs did what was demanded of them. She found herself laughing as she ran, and she didn't know why.

David came to a halt beside a mausoleum of weathered limestone, with a sloping roof, gables, eaves and a low chain fence surrounding it. When Alice caught up, the first thing she said was, "A home."

"It is a home," David said. "A little one-room house. And look." On the iron door there was a bolt secured by a rusty padlock. He undid the padlock with a key from his pocket, shot back the bolt, put both hands to the door and shoved. The door scraped inwards a few inches. "Want to go in?"

She hated herself for hesitating. "I don't know. Is it... right?" She peered into the gap between door and frame and could see nothing within but blackness.

"They're dead. They're beyond caring." Using his shoulder David shunted the door slightly further open, creating a space through which a thin person could easily slip. "There's nothing in there but dust, cobwebs and bones."

"All right." Alice swelled with bravado. "All right. Who cares?"

She eased herself through the gap. Pure and perfect darkness engulfed her, a darkness that smelled of damp and earth and age. Ahead she could make out a stone ledge of some sort and what looked like a brass handle, tarnished but glinting. Turning round, she saw David following her in, squeezing himself through a sliver of daylight that was weaker than she expected, as though to be contained by the interior of a tomb diminished it. Then David grunted and the daylight narrowed to a thin line and disappeared.

"David..."

"Don't worry," he said. Alice couldn't tell where his voice was coming from until a hand softly took her hand. "It's only darkness. It can't hurt you."

A part of her ached with fear; another part was quietly thrilled, and this part seemed to have the upper hand and made the fear its passive consort. She marvelled that her eyes could be wide open and yet useless, showing her nothing except the gibbous green afterimage of David's silhouette in the doorway.

I am in a tomb, she thought. So this is what it's like.

"Why don't we lie down?" David suggested.

"Lie down?"

"Here, on the ground. To see how it feels. How *they* feel."

She didn't need to ask who 'they' were. They were all around her. The very air she was inhaling was infused with their decay. Close by, an arm's reach away, they were pinned in their narrow beds, dressed in their rotting best, hands clasped over their breastbones—a family, generations, a dynasty, reduced to dust and ashes. If she wanted to join them, they would not reject her. They were nothing if not accepting.

She lowered herself to the ground, David providing gentlemanly assistance.

"Lie back," he said. She heard him settling down beside her. A small voice cried out in the back of her head, *What are you doing, girl? This man could be a rapist! A sex fiend!* But she believed — no, she *trusted* — that David was not like that at all. He was above such things.





The cold of the packed earth beneath her penetrated the fabric of her dress and chilled her skin, but in every other respect she felt comfortable. For a while there was only the sound of their breathing. Then David said, "Hear that? Perfect silence. Perfect darkness. Perfect peace. This is what it's like to be dead."

"It's beautiful," Alice sighed.

"Here."

She heard a scratching, and a moment later felt David's fingertips at her lips.

"Try this."

"What is it?"

"You want to know what it feels like to be dead?"

"Yes."

"Then open your mouth."

She parted her lips, and a sift of soil dribbled into her mouth.

"Best get used to it," David said. "You'll be eating nothing else for eternity."

Fighting back the gag-reflex, Alice rolled the soil around her tongue and found to her surprise that the taste, though acrid, could have been a lot worse. It reminded her of the smell of forests on damp afternoons, of lakes and rabbit-holes, of falling over as a child face-first into dirt, of carrots raw from the ground. With a gulp she swallowed down the gritty paste and cleaned a few lingering granules from her teeth with her tongue.

"I've coined a word for people like you and me, Alice," David said. "'Thanatophile'. I thought the term already existed, but I looked in *Chambers* and the *OED* and it wasn't in either. Perhaps there are some concepts society just can't bring itself to name."

"What does it mean?"

"It means 'a lover of death'. Not somebody who likes to fuck corpses. There've been no problems about naming *that* state of mind. It means someone for whom death and dying hold no fear, someone who actively welcomes the concept of death into their life. I'm not talking about martyrs or people with terminal illnesses. I'm talking about sane, healthy people who make a conscious decision to befriend the Reaper — people who feel calmer within themselves because they're looking forward to one day hearing the swish of his scythe."

"I do," she said, but David didn't seem to hear. "Sometimes."

"You see, what Plato and Wittgenstein and Nietzsche and Sartre and all the great thinkers throughout history were flailing about looking for was the answer to the problem of how to live a pure and honest life, a life free from fear. They didn't find it because they were approaching the problem from the wrong end, examining life itself, seeing life as the be-all and end-all, not seeing it as a pre-liminary to the ultimate purpose of being, which is to die. The Tibetans almost got it right, but they insisted on introducing reincarnation into the equation, a get-out clause, a second chance. We don't come back. When life stops, it stops for good."

"And beyond that, there's only peace."

"Only peace," he echoed approvingly. "I know that's what *you* want, Alice. I know that's what *you've* wanted ever since you were old enough to formulate an independent

thought. I can tell just by looking at you. You've begun the process already. Gradually wasting away. Feeling your body getting lighter on you every day, becoming less burdensome. Letting your flesh erode and your joints atrophy. Letting your bones show through your skin. Letting the truth emerge from beneath all the trash."

"It's true," she said, like a sigh. And it *was* true, and she wondered why she had never realised it before. She wasn't punishing herself at all. She was *shaping* herself, making herself into what she most desired to be. "And what do *you* want, David? Don't you want it too?"

"I want you to be happy, Alice. I want you to be free."

She heard his shoes grating on the soil as he pulled himself up to a kneeling position, and she braced herself for the coming kiss. He grasped her shoulders and laid one leg over her thighs, but the kiss did not come.

"I can free you, Alice," he said. "The question is, do you want to be freed?"

Freed from what? From uncertainty? From feelings of rejection? From loneliness? Oh yes, she wanted to be free from all of those.

"I do," she said.

His hands moved to her neck in a dry caress.

"Then let me free you," he said.

She felt his fingers squeeze an instant before they actually did so. It was as though she detected the electrical impulse travelling down his arms before it reached the nerve-endings and delivered its message to the poised muscles. It was not much of a warning but it gave her time to twist her head away and at the same time bring her legs up in a foetal reflex.

She did not mean to knee David in the testicles and incapacitate him, but that was what she did, far more effectively than if she had actually been trying to. The air whooshed out of her lungs and he rolled away from her, gargling and wheezing. Next thing she knew, she was on her feet and stumbling gropingly backwards.

"Alice?" David croaked through the pain. "Alice what did you — Christ, what did you do that for?"

Alice backed up against something hard that scraped her calves. Her fingers found a ridge of smooth, dust-coated wood and followed it until they were sufficiently convinced that it was, as she had thought, the rim of the lid of a coffin which rested on the stone ledge she had glimpsed earlier.

"I thought we...understood each other," David went on in a voice filled with such agony that it almost brought tears to Alice's eyes.

Which way was the door? Her sense of direction had been completely thrown. She thought it must lie somewhere to her right, and keeping her calves in contact with the ledge she shuffled sideways in that direction. At any moment she expected a hand to come out of nowhere and grab her ankle. Wherever David was lying in the pure and perfect darkness of the mausoleum, he could only be less than half a dozen short paces away. She might even be passing within inches of him now and not know it. She struggled to keep her breathing under control and continued to move crablike alongside the ledge.

Her right shoulder butted a wall, and she reached out to the side and a little to the front, and to her relief felt the

rough flaky texture of rusted iron. Her fingers danced as delicately as a spider over the surface of the door but could find no handle. Of course not. Why would anyone put a handle on the *inside* of the door to a tomb? But there had to be some other way of opening it. David wouldn't have shut both of them in there if there wasn't a way of letting them out again, would he? Would he?

"Talk to me, Alice. Where are you?"

The door was not solid iron but a sheet of iron moulded around a frame, overlapping at the edges to leave an even, inch-wide strip of spare metal. Alice inserted her fingers and braced herself.

"Alice?"

She heard David behind her getting unsteadily to his feet, and she put everything she had into the heave, knowing that if she didn't make a gap large enough on the first attempt she probably wouldn't get a second chance. The door wrenched stubbornly inwards, juddering against stone and soil. The sudden glare of daylight screwed her pupils painfully tight, and the edge of the iron overlap cut into the joints between the pads of her fingers, but she kept pulling, jamming her knee into the aperture to speed the process.

"Alice!"

A hand grabbed the shoulder of her dress. With a shriek Alice let go of the door and squirmed through the opening she had made, praying feverishly that it would be wide enough. The edge of the door ground against her ribs and hips, the stone frame scraped her spine, and then she was through and diving free with a rend of tearing fabric.

She fell headlong onto the grass and immediately struggled to her knees, only to discover that the hem of her dress had snagged on the inside of the door. Turning to tug it loose, she looked up to see David worming through the gap, a scrap of black velvet clutched in his outstretched fist. His face, whiter than ever, was wedged between the door and the frame, and his hazel-and-jade eyes stared at her with a mixture of pain and incomprehension.

"What's wrong?" he said. "You wanted to be free, didn't you?"

Giving vent to something that was both a grunt and a scream, Alice jerked her dress free from the door and set off across the grass, stumbling between the headstones. She went about ten yards before realising that David was not chasing her, and glancing back she saw that he was stuck in the doorway and trying to extricate himself in reverse so that he could haul the door further open.

After that, she did not look back again until she had reached the gates of the cemetery.

MONICA CAME HOME TO FIND ALICE BATHED, IN her pyjamas and in bed. Alice said she was feeling a bit under the weather, you know, time of the month due and all that. She lied with a fluency that surprised and mildly ashamed her. Monica heated up some chicken broth and sat by her bedside and spooned it into her mouth. Alice drank half the bowlful, which pleased them both. Then she dozed for a while, waking up at around ten p.m. to find Monica sitting in the armchair in the corner, examining some sheets of A4 paper. It didn't take Alice long to recognise David's letters.

"What are you doing with those?" Alice asked, softly but with an undertone of unmistakable menace.

"Who is this David?" Monica turned one of the sheets over and frowned. "Whoever he is, he doesn't sound like a very nice person to me."

Alice shunted the bedclothes aside and said, in a venomous whisper, "Give them back."

"In fact, he sounds a bit sick."

"You have no right to be reading them."

Monica looked up then, and her eyes were righteously wide. "I have every right, Alice. The last thing someone in your condition needs is some *boy* playing games with your mind."

"It's private correspondence." Alice lowered her bare feet to the carpet, testing her left ankle, which she had twisted during her flight across the cemetery. There was a faint corona of puce bruising around the joint, but it didn't appear to have been sprained badly.

"As long as you're living under my roof at my expense, Alice, nothing of yours is private. Did you go and see him this afternoon?"

"Nothing happened."

"That's not what I asked," said Monica, though it more than adequately answered her question.

Alice took a few short limping steps across the room. "Give them here."

"We are born to degenerate and die," Monica read out. "If you ask me, this fellow sounds deeply disturbed."

"He might be, but at least he's not an interfering old *dyke*," Alice snarled, and made a grab for the letters, but Monica was quicker. She leapt from the chair, holding the pieces of paper defensively behind her head, out of Alice's reach. Her expression was sad, not angry; cold, not hot.

"How dare you talk to me like that, Alice Beckett!" she hissed. "How *dare* you! Aren't I the one who's looked after you for going on two years now? I took you in when no one else would, when even your parents had given up on you. If it wasn't for me, you'd probably be lying in some mental hospital right now with a drip-feed in your arm. I've been mother, sister and nurse to you, and this is the thanks I get?"

"You're evil," Alice hissed back. "Poking around in other people's belongings. That's what evil people do."

"I will not be spoken to like that in my home."

"Your home, your home! You keep shoving that down my throat, don't you?"

"I have to shove things down your throat, Alice, because that's the only way you'll take anything in!"

"That was a cheap shot, Monica, even for you."

Monica tried to appear wholly reasonable. "You're not well, Alice. How many times do you have to be told that?"

"I am the way I am because that's the way I want to be," Alice replied. "Because it's about the only thing in my life I can still control. The only thing you or my parents or the doctor can't have any say in. And if you can't accept that, well then, *fuck* you."

They glared at each other for several moments, chins jutting, nostrils flared, eyes as big as boiled eggs. For a time it seemed that they might even come to blows. Then, abruptly, Alice turned away.

"Go on then," she said. "Take them and burn them. I don't care."

Monica peered lamely at the pieces of paper in her hands. "I never said anything about burning them."

"Well, do whatever you want with them. I don't care." Alice crawled back into bed. "I'm too tired to care." She pulled the bedclothes up over her head. "I'm too tired to care about anything any more."

They had had arguments before, of course. It was only natural. Two people sharing a flat together were bound to disagree now and then. This time, however, Alice had felt something break between them. The slender bridge that had connected them — constructed from her vulnerability and Monica's need to protect — had collapsed, and she knew that it was gone for ever and could not be rebuilt. She knew she had no choice now but to leave. But where would she go?

AFTER THE TELEVISION HAD GONE OFF IN THE living room and the light had gone out in Monica's room, Alice waited a further hour until she was certain that Monica was fast asleep, then stole a five-pound note from her handbag, phoned for a cab, and went downstairs to meet it outside the front door.

"Where to, love?" said the cabbie.

"The Riverwood Cemetery."

"At this time of night?" The cabbie bounced his eyebrows up and down a couple of times. "S'pose you want to reach your grave before dawn, eh?"

"Shut up and drive."

"I KNEW YOU'D COME BACK."

Alice stood shivering on the gatehouse doorstep. David was wearing just a T-shirt and black briefs, and his legs were stippled with gooseflesh. He moved aside to allow her to enter. She climbed the spiral staircase and found herself in a long vaulted room equipped with basic second-hand furniture and a small kitchen unit. A door at the end led off to what she presumed was a bedroom, another to a bathroom. There was a raw cosiness about the place. A twin-bar electric fire glowed on the floor beside a desk on which books, files and sheaves of paper were loosely stacked. A desk-lamp provided the only other illumination.

"You were working?" she asked.

"I always write at night. Sunlight shrivels my inspiration. About this afternoon..."

"It was a misunderstanding," she said. "You thought you knew what I wanted, and you were nearly right, but things have changed. Would you...like to go for a walk?"

"Right now?"

"Right now."

ARMED WITH THE SAME BLANKET AS BEFORE, THEY stole through the night-bound necropolis. The brown sky offered them a handful of stars and a singed moon to see by. Headstones, crucifixes and angels loomed around them, white as ghosts. The stillness in the cemetery was deeper than the background rumble of a city usually permits: it seemed to come from the ground itself, an exhalation of silence, a communal open-mouthed sigh from the airless,

earth-choked windpipes of the thousands buried beneath the damp grass, those for whom the suffering was over, for whom all disappointments were past.

In the mausoleum David laid the blanket out of the ground and Alice lay down, hoisted her skirt up around her waist and see-sawed her knickers down her legs. They made love without much in the way of prelude or preamble, David forcing himself into her in the same manner that he had forced his way into the mausoleum, with one brutal shove. Somewhere in the back of Alice's mind, somewhere away from the pain, a warning clanged like an old school bell: shouldn't they be taking precautions? But she reasoned that, surrounded by so much death, no life could possibly take root. And if David's jism happened to be carrying a fatal disease, well, what else would he be doing then but granting her deepest, darkest wish?

It was over quickly. A squirting shudder from David, and then he was clambering off her, pulling up his jeans, buttoning up.

"Alice?"

She nodded, but then, realising he couldn't see her in the dark, croaked, "Yes?"

"Will you stay with me?"

"For ever, David. For ever and ever."

HIS LIVING SPACE, THOUGH SMALL, WAS LARGE

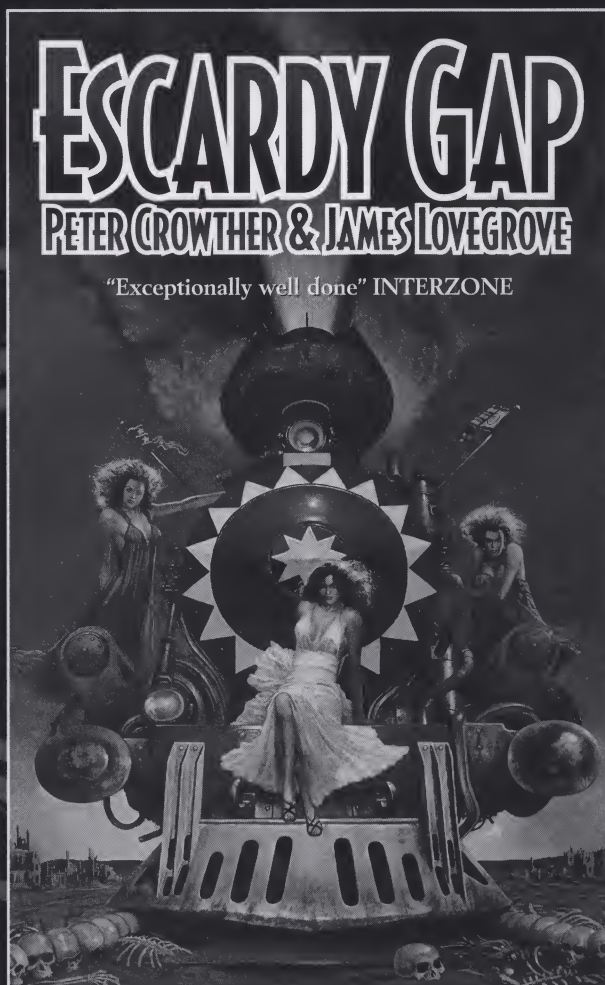
enough for the two of them — a kind of private mausoleum of their own which Alice had all to herself during the day while David was out caretaking. To occupy her mind she bought a very cheap second-hand typewriter and set to work typing up the two hundred or so manuscript pages of David's *magnum opus*, to which David added nightly, gradually unfurling his unifying philosophy, his grand plan for the mind of Man. And after dark, when he wasn't writing, he and Alice would slip out into the cemetery and flit between the memorials to the dead, two thin figures with skin so white it was almost luminescent. Sometimes they would make love in the open air or in their secret second home with the rusty iron door, or else they would sneak up on other amorous couples and observe their antics with the quiet, rapt air of unseen elves or sprites. They frightened drunken tramps, too, whispering in their ears to wake them up from their methylated slumbers. The tramps took one bleary look at the pair of skeletal faces hovering over them and scuttled away, vowing never to sleep off their hangovers in the Riverwood Cemetery again. And slowly the cemetery gathered a reputation. Tales of ghosts and ghouls in the graveyard spread through the local schools and the housing estates nearby. Even David's fellow caretakers began to get a little anxious around the place towards dusk.

The *Argus and Recorder* ran an article on the rumours, and three old women in the waiting room at Dr Muirhead's surgery nodded knowingly over that particular edition of the newspaper — not the same three old women as before, another three, any three. They were all alike, these white-haired Sibyls. They all looked and thought and spoke the same, and they all smiled the same shop-bought smiles: gleaming plastic grins that would remain, like the Cheshire Cat's, long after the rest of them had faded away to dust and nothingness.

JAMES LOVEGROVE's latest novel, the highly acclaimed *Days*, was published recently by Orion. The novel *Escardy Gap*, written in collaboration with Peter Crowther, was published in April as part of Simon & Schuster's new imprint 'Earthlight'. His short stories have appeared in magazines such as *Interzone* and *Fear*, and anthologies such as *Narrow Houses* and *Blue Motel*. His previous story in TTA was the extremely popular 'Even Beggars Would Ride', again written in collaboration with Peter Crowther.



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